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A NEW LOOK AT CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

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FOREWORD

In September 1969, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) held its General Assembly in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, under the theme "With Christ at Work in Africa". Among the reports presented by the working groups was one which committed African and Malagasy Christians to seek an expression of Christianity which would speak to the man of that continent and great island in his own cultural, historical, political, economic, and social context. Since then some efforts have been made in this direction — but not always in a coordinated way.

The African and Malagasy region of the WSCF, which presented at Abidjan a report entitled "Fires on Every Horizon: The Younger Generation and the Church Today", has included this concern in its program. In our sub-regional seminars and in the All Africa Youth and Student Conference organized jointly with the AACC, we have tried to make young people aware of the ambiguous identity of their faith. What is an African Christian? What ties exist between their faith in Christ and the religious tradition of their parents or ancestors? Does the Christian faith as adopted by Africans and Malagasies consist only of liturgical forms and hymns? What does the African cosmogony have to say to us?

If this debate and questioning are to have real significance, the ideas put forward must be dispersed to all corners of this vast continent and island. The work done must be summed up and translated.

One of the books of Professor John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, has been translated into French by the African and Malagasy region of the WSCF, and will soon be published.¹ The WSCF magazine, *Présence*, has devoted a special number to African theology.² This WSCF Book, which could become one of a series entitled "Theology in the Regional Context", is a Federation contribution to the world-

¹ Editions CLE, B.P. 4048, Yaoundé, Cameroun.

² Vol. V, No. 3, 1972. *Présence* is the bi/lingual (English/French) magazine of the African and Malagasy region of the WSCF. P.O. Box 14782, Nairobi, Kenya.

wide theological discussion of which the World Council of Churches conference in Bangkok on the theme "Salvation Today" (December 1972 — January 1973) is another aspect. After this African voice, we hope to hear those of Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and North America. Such a collection, while dealing with a central aspect of the life of the Federation — our seeking to be faithful to Christ — would also be one means by which the regionalized WSCF seeks to live its "unity in diversity". This effort is a gamble. But is it not better to recognize this now than to be taken by surprise? No world community will be able to survive unless it serves this apprenticeship, and chooses this form of self-expression. The age of monoliths is past.

The various articles included in this book represent an attempt to present some viewpoints on Christian theology which are emerging in Black Africa today. No one should look here for a systematic presentation: on the contrary, we have tried to bring together opinions which can serve as so many points of departure for a systematic organization of what is already being called by some an "African theology". Our aim has been to present to our readers the way in which Africans, and particularly Black Africans or "Blacks of the Diaspora", participate in the Christian faith and try to express it.

This is only a beginning. During 1973, in cooperation with the AACC and the Evangelical Community of Apostolic Action, we shall try to push ahead with this reflection and, we hope, with the systematic organization of work on the African expression of the Christian faith.

Nothing in the world today — not even the faith — can escape the indispensable and inevitable tension between universality and diversity. To be really African, to be adopted by African man in his wholeness, the Christian faith must encompass and arise out of the African vision of the world and the cultures of our peoples. The task of ensuring this is essentially the responsibility of Africans. It must be assumed in a painstaking, honest, and comprehensive manner. The world — and the world-wide Christian community — can only profit from such efforts. Let the WSCF, the melting pot of ecumenism, born of the missionary spirit, volunteer today its contribution to the undertaking. In so doing it will be remaining faithful to its *raison d'être*.

May this research be blessed with the intelligence of man and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Aaron Tolen
WSCF Co-Secretary for Africa and Madagascar

AFRICAN CULTURE AND AFRICAN CHURCH

Donald R. Jacobs

One of the most ambitious and indeed most successful ventures of the church in the past century was the evangelization of the continent of Africa south of the Sahara. Seldom if ever in the history of the church have so many people in so short a time turned towards Christ as the Truth and the Life. In large parts of Africa, where a century ago the name of the Son of God was not even known, the majority of the people are now Christians. This phenomenal movement of a people into the church is one of the most important facts of the twentieth century. It is important for international politics and economics, but it is also important in the life of the total church. What will African churches bring as their contribution to the life of the Christian community?

In an attempt to get at least a partial answer to this question, it may be helpful to look at the church in its cultural setting, because it is quite obvious that culture affects the church and the church affects culture.

The Urgency of Cultural Issues

If the church is to be strong and militant, it must believe deeply in the efficacy and sufficiency of Christ. It was once said that "a house divided against itself must fall". No truer warning could be given the church. If it touches Christians only in certain areas, and in others leaves

them to their own devices or to the devices of their pre-Christian religion, to that extent the church is weakened. The title of a recent novel — *A Child of Two Worlds* — describes well not only the church but also individual Christians. Far too many of them trust Christ for certain things and their ancestral spirits for others. They hold to Christ with one hand and to the ancestral spirits with the other. They look to Christ for forgiveness and life eternal and to the local spirits for fertility and daily protection. When these two loyalties come into conflict — and they often do — crises are created which seriously weaken Christians.

When the Gospel comes into a culture, it must be like the Good Samaritan who came where the wounded man was. A carrier of Christ's healing must meet people where they are. The more he knows about their condition, the better he will be able to serve them. Jesus meets people where they are and perfects his image in them. The church is under attack in many newly independent African nations because of its tendency to turn its back upon things African. In some places it has become almost a sub-culture. This will certainly affect it in the future, especially as the new nations try to consolidate their peoples and strive towards national unity.

Moreover, as the initiative for evangelism passes from the hands of the foreigners into local hands, the people expect more cultural understanding. Where they could often forgive the foreign evangelist, they may find difficulty in doing the same for a local church leader. New African church leaders must come to grips with the cultural issues in church life, including form, discipline, and theology. In many places Christians are leaving the older denominations and forming "African churches". While these often go to excesses, they do indicate that in the past cultural factors have not always been given due consideration.

An eminent church leader in East Africa recently remarked that his concern was not for the perfection of the church in Africa but for its very survival. He was reflecting on what happened in North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries. While this may be an alarmist view, it nevertheless suggests something of the size and urgency of the cultural issues. What are the factors which have brought us to this juncture in the life of the church in Africa?

The Gospel came to Africa on the tidal wave of western cultural expansion. In the minds of many — both those who felt the tide coming and those who were part of it — not much distinction was made between Christianity and the culture of those westerners who carried the Gospel. Understandably enough, therefore, Christianity in Africa became very closely identified with a particular cultural form — that of the vigorous white empire. This tidal wave reached its peak about fifteen years ago, but now it is beginning to recede in the face of another increasingly

strong current: the resurgence of what has been called African culture, the "African personality", or, in some quarters, "negritude". This sociological phenomenon, which is undeniable, has great significance for the church and should be studied very carefully in light of God's revealed word.

The Gospel and Culture

It may be helpful to consider the way in which Jesus dealt with the cultural issues in redemption. When God took the initiative to redeem mankind, he came among men as a man, as The Man. He became human, a man in culture. He took a cultural name, Jesus, spoke a local language, received a cultural education, conformed to the cultural mores of his people. He did not become a Roman, an Egyptian, or an Asian, but a very identifiable Jew. He became the universal "Man", but he also became a member of a Jewish home, a part of a small-town community, a Galilean by sub-culture, and, in the eyes of many, especially the Roman officials, he was identified with the radical insurrectionists. Jesus, in order to be completely man, chose to participate in a particular culture. He spoke of God, his Father, from within the culture, and performed deeds of mercy among his people. A universal man must first become a particular man. One aspect of the incarnation, and a very important one, is that the Son of Man revealed the Father in a particular cultural tradition. It is the will of the Father that this be the pattern for Christian nurture and evangelism.

We should not be surprised to find that the Gospel as brought to Africa by the modern missionary movement had a western tint, for western missionaries had to speak out of their experience — they had no other. Unfortunately, at the beginning of the century, because of the new tools and weapons he had developed, western man felt culturally superior and looked upon the non-white world in a patronizing way. And missionaries were not free of this, even though we had some problems with it. To be sure, we were a bit slow to listen to the wisdom of the non-white world. Two major wars (and a host of minor ones) later, we are no longer quite so sure that western culture is all that superior in human terms. In fact, white Christian missionaries are more ready now to listen to the wisdom of Africa than they have been for several decades. This holy task, whereby people from one culture carry the Gospel to another, is no new thing. In fact, large sections of the New Testament were written by evangelists from a Jewish culture to people of other cultural traditions. The fact that almost the entire New Testament was written originally in Greek is proof enough that the writers were communicating across cultural lines, for almost all the writers were Jews.

The New Testament is a missionary book in which the Gospel is made meaningful to those outside the cultural matrix in which Jesus lived, moved, died, and was raised again. It is only when the church is non-missionary and works only in its local setting that it can avoid the many pitfalls met by the evangelist who goes beyond his own culture for the sake of Christ. But when Christ brings together men and women from different cultural traditions, they need special grace to live together in love and unity. It happened in the early church and it happens today that one community presses itself upon another. This is the flesh and arises out of cultural pride. It is not the way of Christ.

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True Indigenization — Answering Authentic Questions

There comes a time when the people who have received the Gospel must take forward this task of evangelism and nurture and actually seek to express the new life in Christ in such a way that others can comprehend him. Not that the Gospel will become synonymous with the local culture: the Gospel must itself judge the culture. But unless the life of Christ finds expression in local cultural terms, the task of evangelism and nurture cannot go forward. How much "local culture" should the church take on? This is a very difficult question to answer. Perhaps it is even the wrong question. But we can say that when Christianity is no longer a "foreign thing" in the minds of the people, it has become local.

At this point, I would like to encourage a broader definition of the word "indigenous". In the past we have heard a lot about building an indigenous church, and this was defined as seeking to make the church self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. All this can happen, and yet the church remain exotic in form and content. The test comes when the cultural scaffolding comes down. Will the building fall with it? It did in North Africa when the Roman Empire collapsed. It did in China, and it is threatening to do so in Africa. We will probably find that the churches which are continuing inside China today are those which were the most thoroughly "Chinaized" before the revolution. When things western are under suspicion in Africa, where will the church be? Will it be so closely tied up with the western culture and way of life that it too will come under censure? There may be no more serious question facing the church in Africa than this. And as responsible Christian men and women, we must address ourselves to the problem more than we are at the present time.

How do we go about trying to assist the church to take on a more local character?

Indigenizing the forms of church life is the simplest — and also the most superficial — way. Some people think that a church in Africa is indigenized when drums accompany the singing! While an indigenization of form is of course necessary, it does not really deal with the problem. There must be a new look at the content. Every culture has its own particular way of thinking and its own assumptions. This means that in each culture people will have certain questions which to them seem very important. For example, if those with whom I am sharing the Gospel are seeking for answers about sickness, calamity, and witchcraft, then perhaps I should address myself to those concerns more than, let us say, to the authority of the Scriptures, which may never have been an issue for them. We too often assume that what is important to us is important to people of another culture.

While the Word is unchanging indeed, this should not blind us to the fact that the Spirit through the Word reaches a man right where he is in his cultural milieu. While I may find one particular section especially relevant to my experience now and therefore meeting a felt need, I must have enough grace to allow my brother in another culture the same liberty. I may find divine healing or the gift of prophecy interesting but not very vital, while my brother feels that he is tremendously helped by what God says to him through these concepts.

The problem is not that we missionaries have been guilty of giving the wrong answers to questions. It is that we have not been very adept at hearing the questions burning in the hearts of the people and at going to the scriptures afresh for answers. We too often give good answers to questions which the people never raise, and fall silent when their authentic questions emerge. How many of us are very helpful in the question of witchcraft, or in explaining the equality of men, or in finding God's way in the complex social circumstances of struggling developing nations? Then, too, symbols mean different things to different people, because in all instances symbols are given specific and often changing cultural meaning. Assuming that language and even grammar are symbols, we realize how complicated the cross-culture task of communication really is.

The major difference between the independent churches and the traditional churches is that the former are attempting to affirm a culture which has all too often already vastly changed. They assume that it is possible to go back to connect with the pre-modern era and to get really "African" churches. The result is often interesting, but this is probably not the way. The beauty of the Gospel is that it meets people where they are, in their changing circumstances, and takes them on from there. The independence movement within the church does indicate, however, that the traditional churches have for too long been culture-

denying, and that they must now take the prevailing cultural orientation of the people more seriously. This is especially important in an era such as ours in which the assertion of things African has a high value.

When we speak of the indigenization of the church, we are not speaking of syncretism in which our Lord Jesus shares the throne with another. Nor are we speaking of the relative nature of truth. We simply mean that the people of every culture on the face of the earth should be encouraged to invite Jesus into their midst, and to find him so profoundly meaningful just where they are that they seek his mind more and more for daily perplexities and joys of living, that their faith in Jesus Christ becomes so great that they hold to him as Lord of life no matter what storms may come, and no matter how rapid and disconcerting is the change in society. They have the Word of God and the Spirit of God, which is enough to make them more than conquerors.

We are tempted to think that we need a cultural revival in the church. In many ways this is true. But what is really needed is a spiritual revival, so that we are assured of the Holy Spirit's leading through the cultural jungles. If we try to solve these cultural problems without an accompanying new work of regeneration and holiness, we can expect nothing more than a resurgence of pride. But under the leading of the Spirit, we can be assured that every "people" will be enabled to bring their "peculiar treasure" to the Lord of all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The articles by Lawrence B. Zulu and Manas Buthelezi are reprinted from *Essays on Black Theology*, a book published by the "Black Theology Project" of the University Christian Movement of South Africa before it dissolved itself. The book has since been banned by the South African government. Several other articles were originally presented as papers at the National Seminar on Black Theology held at St. Ansgar's, Roodepoort, South Africa, in 1971.

It has not been possible to secure permission directly from some of the authors for the reproduction here of their articles, and for this we apologize.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

John Milimo

In an article of this length, one can put down only the bare outlines of what might be called "African traditional religion". One of its most characteristic marks is the feeling of oneness and brotherhood which is expressed in so many ways, and especially in our proverbs and other wise sayings. It is expressed in the sacred language of myth, and of late has found public and explicit, but adapted, expression in such nationwide "philosophies" as "African socialism", "Ujama" of Tanzania, and the "Humanism" of Zambia. I am deeply convinced that if Christianity or any other imported religion is to gain a foothold in Africa, it will have to build upon this desire for brotherhood.

A Man because of Others

From our earliest childhood we are told to feel concern for our neighbour's well-being because we are one with him: what happens to him happens to us. *Zidzo pano nza tonse*, a Nyanja proverb, means, "What comes here is for us all". When one sees one's neighbour in trouble, one should help him. Another Nyanja proverb says, *Mzako akapsa ndebvu mzimire* ("When you see your neighbour's beard burning, rush to put out the fire"). Even our identity as man, *mntu*, is derived from our fellow men. *Muntu ni muntu cifukwa cabanyake*, a Tumbuka saying, is

translated, "A man is a man because of others": it is others who make him a person. After all, as another Tumbuka proverb says, *Umoyo nkukhalirana, wekha nkanyama* ("Life is when you are together; alone you are an animal"). We are told to respect all men, even those who hardly seem to deserve it, for, as a Sena proverb, *Psiru ndiye adaona nkhondo*, has it, "It was the madman who saw the enemy approaching". According to the myth summed up in this proverb, when war was coming near the village, it was the madman who saw the enemy approaching and came to report, so the people were not taken unawares. Even the weak, the old, and the infirm are to be held in honour, for "To laugh at your neighbour is a sin", as a Bantu proverb says. Man must be valued not according to what he is able to do, nor according to his strength or his wisdom, but simply because he is *man*. Man is value number one. He is the criterion of good and bad, and cannot be sacrificed. All structures and institutions exist for his good.

This feeling of oneness is projected even to the realm of the deceased, who are one with us. So-called ancestor worship and sacrifices are nothing but a convocation, a general gathering of the whole clan which is composed of the living and the dead. At this gathering we discuss together some problem which greatly disturbs the living. Here we consult these elders who, because they are now dead, know better than we do. To symbolize our oneness, we share a meal with them, for the meal is the great symbol of our unity. In some tribes this oneness is expressed daily in the sharing of the main meal. For instance, the Tonga throw away the first lump of *nsima* (thick maize porridge) so the ancestors can partake of it.

This very strong desire to be one means that there is no greater sin than that which leads to the breaking up of the clan. There is no greater misfortune than to be ousted from the clan. The lonely person is *persona non grata*; too often he is considered a witch, and can be killed without the murderer being charged with any crime.

Given to Enmity

However, traditional African society is realistic enough to recognize the presence in life of disagreements and misunderstandings. These are acknowledged and regretted in such proverbs as *Imiti yili pamo tayibula kukwesana*, a Lala saying which means, "Trees which grow close together cannot avoid brushing against each other". People are so aware of this rubbing and brushing that an unhealthy atmosphere of fear, distrust, and suspicion often reigns. This is reflected, for example, in the fear of witches, and in suspicion of anyone who is a bit out of the normal, for

instance a rich person or a lonely man. Such people are very often suspected of sorcery. This fear and suspicion are even projected on to the supernatural level: the spirits of ancestors and the forces of nature.

If we want to learn the cause of this lack of harmony and the presence of fear and distrust among men, we have only to gather round the family fire on a cold June evening and listen to the fascinating story which is being told:

Once upon a time the honey-guide invited Man to go to extract honey. Man set out with his friend the Cock. On the way, other animals joined them: the Duiker, Leopard, Bush-Cat, Lion, Eland, and Elephant. When Man had extracted the honey, he divided it into four portions. One he gave to the Cock and the Bush-Cat to share, another to the Leopard and the Duiker, and the third to the Lion and the Eland. He himself shared the fourth portion with the Elephant. A fight broke out between each pair, and the weaker of the two was killed. Then the Elephant got up and asked the Man: 'Why have you brought the Cock and the Duiker and the Eland to their death. Your blood will be set against theirs.' A fight then began between him and Man. Man, using his brain, killed the Elephant. So now there were four conquerors over four corpses. They were all sad and bitter because of the blood they had shed. Then the Lion said, 'Now the land is spoiled; we have killed one another here, and shall give ourselves to deadly enmity from now on.'¹

So the bitterness and strife in the world are all due to man's having raised his hand against his neighbour. A Lala proverb sums up this idea very concisely: *Mutoba tatoba citenge, icitobe citenge kamwa* ("A molar does not break a shelter; what breaks a shelter is the mouth"). The shelter is the place in the middle of the village where men meet and take their meals; the breaking of the shelter is the breaking up of the village. The tongue and not greed is what disperses people. The Sena say, *Ntanthonga n'taie ku tsanga*, that is, "Throw the quarrelsome person into the bush" — he is a danger to society for he causes division among men.

Indeed, every since that fateful day man has given himself to deadly enmity with his fellow men. By his wrong doing he has set a wedge between himself and them. This division is very much regretted, for it renders vain man's deep craving to live in harmony with his fellows. This longing may be dictated by such utilitarian motives as the need to cooperate with others, as expressed in the Luvalé proverb, *Munwe unwe kawexi kutumbula jinako* ("One finger does not pick up a louse"). It may also be dictated, as we have tried to show, by man's feeling of oneness with his fellows. But man's wrong doing shatters this hope of being together, and we disperse. In our dispersion we try to create small, closed-in solidarities and securities in the form of clans, where we hope to find safety and understanding. Thus we can boast, *Pane hama ngepone*

¹ cf. C. Young, *Contemporary Ancestors* (Lutterworth Press), pp. 133-35.

hama verudzi rumwe vanezivana, a Shona proverb meaning, "Where there are relatives they keep one another". In Tumbuka we say, *Mwabenena bene' muyanenge bantu bawaka mba kavuluvuli* ("Among the clan you may agree; those outside it are a whirlwind"); that is, those not in the clan should not be taken into one's confidence — they are like a whirlwind which passes on as fast as it comes. But even the clan fails to offer us what we really need. How often we hear a Kalunda sigh, *Kawa kani kungumba kwanyikani hunhela* ("My dog has left me and my young brother has rejected me"). In other words, even those who are supposed to be trustworthy sometimes reject one.

Abandoned by God

The hitherto unwritten "African Old Testament" tells us that man's wrongdoing not only drives away his fellow men but is also responsible for the great distance which separates man from God. We were hardly old enough to learn anything when, as we sat around the fire on a very cold evening, our elders, with some remorse and regret, told us this truth through the sacred language of myth:

In the beginning Nzambi, God, ordered all men to live at peace one with the other, but they would not. Therefore Nzambi sent disease to them and other troubles, which so distressed them that they cried aloud for help. So Nzambi came down to them, but though they acknowledged that they had done wrong, each protested that it was the others who were first responsible. Their noise and contention were such that Nzambi grew very angry with them. He left them to their quarrelling, and has never come back.²

So man is left alone, a solitary, tormented creature, condemned through his own fault to agonizing isolation. His God, whom he recognizes to be so near him in his creation, is yet so far away. His fellow men, who live in the same hut, are yet strangers to him. He has only himself to count upon. Even nature revolts against man when he does wrong. Very often the success of a hunting expedition or a fishing adventure becomes the yardstick for judging the moral standards of a village. When the rains fail, it is said that someone's malicious deeds are responsible.

Man suffers bitterly, without hope for the coming of a brighter day when his lot will be changed. He often tries to rediscover God, who he knows can answer all his problems. In the place of God, he has put the dead, and this seems to have been very providential, for these spirits have helped man to hold high the traditional concept of God. He is not a tangible God, a God of earthly and material security, a God of man's

² cf. C. Young, *Contemporary Ancestors* (Lutterworth Press), p. 142.

making, to be manipulated by him. It is very significant that the same myths which tell us of God's dealings with men in that primordial time before he withdrew from them portray him precisely as a weak and tangible God, the kind which man makes in his own image. The Lozi people of Zambia have a myth which shows how difficult God found it to run away from man. A Tonga myth tells us that at one stage God was not able to settle certain problems, but had to ask his friends for advice. In another myth we are told that he was powerless to defeat man who had intruded into his abode. But now it is the spirits who are made in the image of man, and who can be manipulated to fit his needs and aspirations, while God remains the high God, the Great One who controls all things from his high heaven, who, though he takes an interest in us, has withdrawn from us.

This then seems to be the essence of African traditional religion. There is a great longing for brotherhood, but because of man's wrongdoing this has become impossible. Man is now isolated, abandoned even by God, whom he recognizes as good. All religious activities and ceremonies are an effort to restore the harmony between man and man and between man and God, and thus to bring man back to that original state of life which he so often talks about in his sacred myths and stories.

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY

S. G. Kibicho

This is a vast subject, and I can discuss only in a brief and general way what I consider to be the distinctive features of African traditional religion, and how these can enrich our Christian faith as we seek to reinterpret it and adapt it to our African situation. I am approaching this subject from the point of view of a Christian who believes that Christianity fulfils the African traditional religions, but who also believes that if our churches are to be truly African, they need to find their real roots in the African traditional beliefs and way of life.

The Treasure of Tradition

There is a great and rich treasure hidden with the old men and women who are believers in the traditional religions, if only we could find the ways and means and the patience to dig it out — a treasure that could greatly enrich our new emerging African church and society, and indeed the universal church and humanity as a whole. Unfortunately, the situation is not very favourable to excavating this treasure and incorporating it into the new structures of church and society which we are seeking to build, because the atmosphere, especially in the church, is too much dominated by the colonial mentality of identifying all things African and traditional with evil, all things western with good. This is a dangerous and impoverishing mentality which we must fight constantly and devotedly.

I hope to encourage educated African young men and women to go back to these still surviving guardians of this rich treasure of our traditions, and get at least part of it from them before they disappear with it into the world of the spirits. We need an emphatic call to them to recover these noble African traditions and ways of life which lie idle and neglected, yet which we need so much to enrich our new African society and faith. Not everything in the traditional ways of life was good, of course. Do not mistake me here: all I am saying is that there is a lot which was good and which we must not allow to disappear completely. What I say applies particularly to the Kikuyu religion with which I am most familiar, but most of it is also true of other African religions.

The African religion is a way of life. It embraces all aspects of life in the community. It might be defined as "the total way of life for the tribal-community in its vital solidarity". Religion is completely and inseparably interwoven with the traditions and customs of the people, and, unlike Christianity, it embraces all members of the community. To be a Kikuyu automatically means to be a believer in the Kikuyu religion. In fact there is no word for religion in Kikuyu, and I believe this is true of many African languages. There is no division between the sacred and the profane. Reality is a whole, comprising mainly two parts: the visible world of men and things, and the invisible world of the God and the spirits. The invisible is as real as the visible, and the two are inseparable. No one ever questioned the reality of the world of spirits and the God, because everyone experienced it, and they were not as foolish as modern scientific men who think that nothing can exist whose reality cannot be proved by at least one of the five senses. They had a sixth sense, if you like, the sense of the spiritual reality.

The ultimate purpose of religion was not to philosophize or theologize about this reality, or any part of it, in an attempt at a theoretical interpretation. Rather, the sole aim of the people's religion was to teach them and to enable them *to live* wholesomely and to participate in this total reality, in a harmonious relation with it all. Here I feel that they knew better than we moderns the teaching of Christ: "What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mark 8:36)

The God of the Africans

Let us now look more closely at the two aspects of the reality with which religion concerned itself. We shall begin with the spiritual realm: the abode of the God and the ancestral spirits. Every true African

believed in one supreme God, the creator and sustainer of all men and of all things. His existence was never doubted; it was simply taken for granted. I once put the following question to two Kikuyu *wazees*: "How did the Kikuyu people come to believe in God, although they had never seen him?" They thought this was one of the most stupid questions they had ever heard, and retorted, "Are you trying to make fools of us or what? Is there any living man, except a fool, who does not believe in God? Don't you *athomi* (i.e., literates, as Christians were called) believe in God, yet you have never seen him? How else can you explain the origin and the continuance of life?"

As regards God's nature, they never tried to theorize about his attributes: they simply experienced his presence. They knew from experience that he was a being completely different from men. In Kikuyu, even grammatically, God is in a class by himself. The personal prefixes, infixes, and suffixes are those of the "animal" class, but they are meant to signify the God class. The following sentence will serve as an illustration: "Ngai ni njuru yunaga igiri ria muhiriga" (literally, "The God, it is terrible, it breaks the gate-support of the household", said in reference to the death of the man of the household). The prefixes in the adjectives "terrible" (njuru) and the verb "it breaks" (yunaga) are the same as would be used for an animal, e.g., a bull: "Ndegwa ni njuru yunaga igiri, etc."; but they signify a different class when used of God. Now note the difference when we substitute man in the same sentence: "Mundu ni muru unaga igiri ria muhiriga".

God's most distinctive quality then is his incomparableness. He is the most real, yet the most mysterious being; the most powerful and most wise; he is to be experienced and lived with, rather than thought about and questioned. They believed that he was both transcendent and immanent: living in heaven but also everywhere present in his overruling and sustaining work. Men approached him not individually, but as a family or a community — through sacrifices and ceremonies, in prayer and thanksgiving. There were special times for these, e.g., planting and harvesting, birth, puberty, marriage, death, etc.; famine, drought, epidemics, or illness in the home all called for special prayers.

The elders were both the civic and religious leaders, as there was no division between church and state. As President Kenyatta says in his book, *Facing Mount Kenya* (p. 242), "The church and state were one". The thing I would like to note particularly is that individualistic religion was unknown. This is because they believed, again from experience, that no man is an island unto himself. An individual is a living human being only in relation with others in his family, clan, age-group, and so on. The claim to a direct individualistic relation with God encourages religious egotism and breaks the solidarity of the community. Here is

another useful lesson I think we need to learn in our churches where egotistic individualistic pietism is a real danger.

Another important thing to note is that man's relationship with other men is stressed more than his relationship with God. So long as your relationship with other men, both living and departed, is right, then you know that God is pleased with you, and there is no need to bother God. I think they were aware of Micah's words: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8).

The Ancestral Spirits

The other spiritual beings to which men were related were the dead members of their families, clans, or age-groups: the ancestral spirits. In all communal events — ceremonies, feasts, sacrifices, prayers — these departed ones were included, and their presence was really felt. For instance, during the ceremonial pouring of beer in the household, either for blessings or cleansing, the head of the family group always began by serving the departed ones of the family. He would pour a hornful of beer in the centre of the household saying, *Yukiaj inyui mwathire, na mutura-theme. Wee baba nyira haha* (pours), *nawe maitu nyuira haha* (pours). Literally: "Take this, you departed ones, and bless us; you, father, drink from here (pours), and you, mother, drink from here (pours)". The spirits were not worshipped. This was communion with the spirits who were the invisible members of the family or the community. And here again they were right. There is a sense in which our personalities are bound up with the personalities of all those who have been close to us, even after they have passed away from this physical world: they continue to be real and alive to us.

At other times, the spirits might visit the household, or the community, to bring misfortunes as punishment for misdeeds by some members. At such times, special sacrifices were called for, to propitiate the spirits and to rid the family or the community of the calamity. Otherwise, if men lived harmoniously, not forgetting the spirits, they were not bothered by them, although of course there were some malicious ones who kept troubling people: i.e., those men and women who were troublesome and hard to get along with, or to please, even before they departed. Their unreasonable demands could be ignored without any harm.

Sacred Human Relationships

We have seen how religion affected men's relation to God and to the ancestral spirits. Let us now look briefly at how it affected relationships between men. As we have seen, family and community solidarity, and the harmonious relationship between all members of the family and the community were the main goal of religion. Each individual was born into a set of relationships which were so connected and interwoven that there was not one individual in the clan, and in the whole tribe, with whom he did not have a sacred relationship or covenant of one kind or another. He had a multitude of fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, age-grade peers, grandparents, and so on (many are untranslatable into English, e.g., *ngabu*, *wathiomo*, *mukha*), and each relationship carried with it certain duties and obligations, regulated by custom and taboos.

This complicated set-up of sacred relationships with all, according to age, sex, family kinship, etc., was a means of ensuring that each member treated every other member with dignity and due respect. A man's worth was not measured by how much wealth or education he possessed, or by his position in the government of church or state, as is the tendency among modern men. Every person, rich or poor, crippled or whole, was regarded and treated as of great worth, simply by virtue of the fact that he was a member of the community, tied together with every other member in strong, sacred, unconditional bonds of relationships, and like every other member of the community, having an inalienable right to due respect and assistance in case of need, and having similar duties and obligations to every other person in the community.

An illustration of this point, which is a most important feature of the African traditional religion: I would show the same respect to a sickly and poor old man of my father's age as I would show to my father and to any other man of his age. Another example of the respect which marked the relationship between the younger and older members of the community: whenever I meet a woman of my mother's age, who is therefore also my mother in that sense, I have to walk at the side of the pathway, leaving it to her. But she must show respect to me in the same way. So she passes on the opposite side of the pathway, and it is left empty. The point is that we must not push one another, or even brush against one another, for this would be a shameful sign of disrespect. I do not know how this would work in modern towns and cities! Only those of the same age-grade and the same sex could have a direct and unrestricted relationship with each other. Younger people would never behave badly or in a disrespectful way before their elders, and the latter would show similar respect to the younger ones.

Even greetings were used as a means of expressing due respect according to the different relationships. First of all, it was considered as a lack of respect and manners to pass another person, especially an older one, without greeting him or her, and there were different kinds of greetings according to the relationship with the person being greeted. For instance, I would greet my mother, *Wakia maitu* ("I greet thee, mother"), and she would answer, *Wakia awa* ("I greet thee, father"). She calls me father because I am named after her father's age-grade. Today all these things which helped each person to hold every other person in respect and dignity, regardless of his physical circumstances, have been largely forgotten, and this is a great loss. They were an important part of the African traditional religion.

During and just before the Mau Mau period, there was an attempt to revive them, especially the greetings, and some of them are still being observed in places, particularly in Nyeri. I remember an experience I had once in Nyeri at that time, before I had learned these new greetings (i.e., new to the younger generation). I passed an elderly woman (i.e., a grandmother) without greeting her, and she called me back peremptorily and asked, "Is it because you did not see me that you passed me like that without greeting me?" She rebuked me thoroughly and fined me then and there. Another time I met a woman of my mother's age. I remembered to greet her, but unfortunately I had not yet learned the proper forms of the greetings, and I used the wrong one, *Wi nwega?*, which is the common greeting for anyone. The woman retorted, "Am I of your age-grade that you greet me *wi nwega?*" Again I was fined. From that time on, I watched my manners, especially in my relation with the elderly women.

African Views of Man and God

We have seen that the main emphasis in African traditional religions was on the harmonious relationship of every individual with all other members of the community, both living and dead. Modern men may criticize this on the ground that it lays too much stress on the individual personality. But a closer examination will show that the African traditional view has a better existential understanding of the nature of personality than the modern views, especially those from the west which put too much stress on individualism. The right view of man is the one which recognizes that a person is truly human only in relation with other persons, both living and dead. This is also the biblical view of man.

Another criticism might be that there is too much emphasis on the individual's relationship with other men, and too little on his relation with God. But here again, our brief survey has shown that although the Africans regarded God as too great to be bothered by men approaching him in individual prayers, they also believed that the maintenance of a harmonious relationship with each other and with the world of the spirits was his will. This is what he required of men. When they were right with each other, they were right with God, and there was no need bothering him unnecessarily. Here again, I think they were more right (though this does not mean that their view was perfect) and closer to the teachings of Christ than the modernized or westernized spiritualists in the churches, who teach that you can be right with God even when you are not right with other men, even when you regard and treat others of God's children cruelly and with disrespect. There are, for instance, many pious members of Christian churches who practise racism and classism, and they believe that this has nothing to do with their faith. I remember once in the United States a fellow student at the seminary telling me that his father was a good Christian, though he was also a staunch segregationist. I asked him whether he did not see any contradiction in this: a good Christian who is also a segregationist, who therefore cannot worship God in the same church with a black man! He answered that what mattered most was one's relationship with God. Besides, he knew that his father really loved negroes in his heart, and as an illustration of this he related how one day he saw him shed tears for their negro servant who was sick in the hospital. I said to him, "Maybe you have also seen a woman shed tears for her dog".

The point I am stressing is this: The individualistic spiritualism which is so rapidly gaining influence in our churches and in our society is completely foreign to the traditional African view of man and God, and it is also foreign to the biblical view. A common form of this false spiritualism here in East Africa is the individualistic-salvationistic sectarianism so prevalent in our churches. Like racism, which is also still a real danger in part of our continent and in other parts of the world, this false spiritualism stresses the salvation of the individual and has little real human concern for the social needs of other men. It sees no connection between social-political issues and faith.

The church must continue to fight against this dangerous heresy with renewed stress on the dignity of every human being, regardless of social or economic position, and on love to all. As John tells us in the New Testament, "If one says he loves God while he hates his brother, he is a liar"; and again, "If you do not love your brother whom you see, how can you love God whom you have never seen"; and again, as Jesus says to all who claim to be his disciples but who show no concern for their

fellowmen who are in need, "As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me" (Matt. 25:31ff.). The African emphasis on corporate personality, and on the respect and dignity due to every individual, is something we need to recapture and incorporate into our Christian faith, as we seek to reinterpret it and adapt it to our African social situation.

Finally, the idea of the solidarity of the whole human race, which needs greater emphasis through the churches today than ever before, fits in very well with the African emphasis on corporate personality and the dignity of every individual. Through good teaching, the solidarity of the African family, clan, and tribe, can be extended to include the whole human family. Similarly, the doctrine of the Incarnation fits in very well in this Christianized African anthropology and theology. For Christ is seen in this new setting as the ever-present, incarnate, divine Representative Head and Redeemer of this New United Humanity. He is also the Mediator, the bringer of that harmonious relationship in the whole human community, and also between the world of men and the world of the God and the spirits which the African traditional religions sought to achieve and to maintain. Looked at from this perspective, Christianity can be seen, and can be made, the true fulfilment of the African traditional religions, as it is of all religions.

THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF DEATH

Harry Sawyerr

Human life, for Africans as for all other human beings, revolves around four major events — birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Jomo Kenyatta refers to them as crises, which affect not only an individual Kikuyu but also the whole family and its neighbours and friends.¹ Typical of this attitude is the convention of the Krio of Sierra Leone, which demands that at the birth of a child, it is very bad taste for relatives and neighbours not to congratulate the new mother and wish the baby well, with a gift however small as a symbol of good-will. Not to do so suggests grievous hostility and ill-will; it is an unpardonable social offense. Among the Mende, also of Sierra Leone, everyone living near the home of a newly born baby must wish him well — *fia-le, O* ("may all go well with you"). At the birth of twins and triplets, this good-will is given practical expression. The women of the neighbourhood take the twins, displayed in a winnowing fan, and go dancing with them from house to house, where they are given presents of goods or clothing. Kenyatta also tells that if a man is struck by lightning — a punishment for looking up when it is flashing — but not killed, his family must come together to plead corporately on his behalf with Mwena Nyaga or Ngai, the God of the Kikuyu who ordinarily is not to be bothered. Both the living and dead members of the family are believed to join in propitiating the anger of Ngai.²

¹ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: 1968), p. 234.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 236-40.

Other instances of family solidarity abound in Africa. However, we shall restrict the rest of this paper primarily to some West African tribes.

Birth and Death

Of the four major life events mentioned earlier, birth and death constitute the first and last. At birth, the baby is separated from the mother and assumes a new mode of existence; at death, both the newly born and the centenarian cease to exist and are parted from the larger group of living beings. In cases of still-birth, the baby is born dead. There thus exists a close relationship between these two poles of man's life.

According to Dr. J.B. Danquah, in Akan thought the true contrast is between *birth* and death, not between *life* and death. He goes on to suggest that the words death and life must be thought of in terms of one's whole outlook on life. For a selfish man, living "for himself alone", death is a reality. But for an individual who is aware of his belonging to a larger whole death is "nothing but a stage in the consciousness of a race, the experience of his kind". For such, "Death is only an aspect of birth, ...an instrument of the total destiny, the continuity of the kind, the permanence and persistence of the organic whole which is the greatest good of endeavour". Indeed, he adds, "nothing lives or dies of itself".³

Danquah assumes that a man is born with a destiny which is to be fulfilled by means of successive reincarnations. At the same time, the blood of his race runs through his veins and therefore from him to his descendants. Death is thus "less than a negation of life"⁴ because "the fact of family carries with it an assurance of continuity, its endurance, persistence, and permanence".⁵ Danquah's language is often difficult to understand. The reincarnations no doubt come to an end when the destiny assigned to a man at birth is fulfilled.⁶ But by that time his descendants have come into their own, and the cycle continues at a different level. Death is of course biologically a new thing, a consequence of "the failure of the higher animals and man to integrate perfectly the vital energy put forth by them with the mental development" they had

³ J.B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London, second edition, 1968), p. 156f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 82f.

attained. For the good Akan Chief, Danquah adds, death is the road to deification.⁷

The Yoruba of Nigeria and the Krio of Sierra Leone also believe in reincarnations, and maintain that when people die, they return to this life reincarnate in their descendants. The Yoruba go further than the Krio in postulating successive as well as simultaneous multiple reincarnations. For a man with several children, all of whom showed filial piety in giving him respectable funeral rites, the reincarnation is assumed not only in one grandchild but in several, and in great grandchildren born of the surviving sons, daughters, cousins, and nephews.⁸ The Yoruba also hold that a man is born with a destiny (*ori*) which may be requested or assigned to him by *Olodumare* just before he is born. But the idea of the *ori* seems to vacillate between that of something personal and of something belonging to a deceased ancestor. So a man who does not succeed in his undertakings must offer a sacrifice to his *ori*; but a woman may offer a sacrifice to the *ori* of her husband's father, supposedly in heaven. The Mende of Sierra Leone also postulate the predetermined destiny of a man at birth (*nemi*), with the important qualification that the *nemi* blossoms as he performs acts of kindness to others, who in turn utter a word of blessing in their expression of thanks. Presumably, the Mende *nemi* is assumed to be always good, in contrast to the Yoruba *ori* which may be good or bad.⁹ The relationship between the destiny of the newly born individual and that of his ancestors is difficult to determine. Danquah's presentation makes this even more difficult, because for him reincarnation takes place only because the destiny of the reincarnate ancestor is as yet unfulfilled. Father Placide Tempels, writing of the Bantu of the Congo, gets over this problem by denying any predetermined destiny of the individual, or of the ancestor whom he presumably reincarnates; instead, he postulates a vital force which brings the newly born individual into a vital relationship with the deceased, who is in a like vital relationship with "his progenitors". He goes on to say, "Perhaps the idea can be better expressed by saying not that it is a predetermined human being belonging to the clan who is reborn, but that it is his individuality returning to take part in the life of the clan by means of the vital influences through which the deceased gives clan individualization to the living born, to the living fruit of the womb that is to be born into the clan".¹⁰ Danquah describes this

⁷ J.B. Danquah, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

⁸ E.B. Idowu, *Olodumare* (London, 1962), p. 194.

⁹ Idowu, *op. cit.*, p. 171ff; Harry Sawyerr, *God: Creator or Ancestor* (London, 1970), p. 83.

¹⁰ Placide Tempels, "Bantu Philosophy", *Présence Africaine* (Paris, 1959), p. 73, cf. p. 72.

feature as "racial immortality".¹¹ Father Tempels may be right about the vital relationship between the living and the ancestors and between one generation of ancestors and their predecessors, but he has not given enough place to the role ascribed to destiny among the Akan, the Mende, and the Yoruba, for example.

Birth and death in every case remain integrally connected, and even if West Africans do not understand the respective origins of these, they are fairly united in the idea that a baby when born is constituted of body — flesh, blood, bones, and muscles — on the one hand, and spirit on the other. The spirit part comes from the Supreme Being. It is the spark of God, a fire which instills life into the blood of the foetus.¹² The Akan call this spark *Kra*, the Mende *Igafa*, the Yoruba *Emin*. So after a baby is born, when its skin is still soft, each of these tribes allows a set number of days to elapse before it is brought out into the open, in order to give the divine spark — the fire of life — time to take full possession of the body in which it operates. This is another way of keeping the child away from hostile influences, both physical and psychical, which may cause its death.

At death this divine spark returns to its divine origin, and an equal number of days is prescribed for the complete return. The physical properties of the individual — infant or adult — disintegrate, but it seems to be supposed that his individuality remains on earth, continuing its existence in the land of the dead (Akan, *samandow*). So we now find ourselves with two aspects of death — the divine and the personal. The latter is the basis of the belief in the continued existence of the ancestors. They preserve in death their personal likes and dislikes; they feel hungry, become angry, and expect from their children appropriate filial piety and respect; they come to their survivors in dreams; they assume the form of birds, e.g. vultures (the Krio, the Yoruba), or of monkeys and chimpanzees (the Mende). In this context, death is akin to a journey. Among, say the Mende, this journey is up a steep hill, and death gasps are analogous to one's panting for breath when climbing quickly. Some tribes also believe that at death the spirit crosses a river to enter the land of the dead. In some cases, for example among the Yoruba and Mende, these two aspects are not very clearly defined. At the same time, one could say that the good go to the land of the dead — heaven or paradise,¹³ while the wicked, generally regarded as witches, are not allowed to survive death.

¹¹ Danquah, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

¹² Cf. E. Meyerowitz, "Concepts of the Soul among the Akan of Ghana", *Africa*, Vol. XXI, 1951, p. 25f; W.T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct* (London, 1968), p. 88; Idowu, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

¹³ cf., E.B. Idowu, *op. cit.*, p. 200; Harris and Sawyerr, *op. cit.*, p. 30 et *passim*.

So the Efiks of Calabar (Nigeria) burn witches;¹⁴ the Mende bury them in a shallow grave unmourned and unsung.¹⁵ The Tenne used to dismember them and bury their limbs separately. A dead witch is supposed to be much more wicked than a living one, and as a spirit is immune to any anti-witch charms. According to the Akan, even the *Kra* of evil persons are not allowed to stay in the Upper Kingdom, but become evil spirits on earth with the possibility of repentance. If they do repent, they may be reincarnated in children born blind, or lame, or otherwise infirm.¹⁶ Many groups believe that those who die by violence also wander about and sometimes appear to various persons, until their allotted span of life is reached. After that they are able to enter the land of the dead.

Death is symbolically postulated in a number of initiation cults like *poro* among the Mende. *Poro* initiates are said to be eaten by the spirit of the cult at the beginning of the ceremonies and regurgitated in a re-birth at the end.¹⁷ So a Mende man would mention the *hale* (medicine) of which he had died (*has*) as a point of reference when taking a serious oath.

Two associate notions come into view here. The first is that the ancestors live close to God but also close to their living descendants. They intercede with God for them. The Kwotto of Nigeria therefore appeal to their deceased kings to give them rain, i.e., to intercede with God on their behalf for rain, or for relief in times of national disasters. As priest-kings they are now more capable of approaching God effectively. However, the commoners are not left out; when they die, they are invoked to give strength to the men, babies to the women, and to improve the harvest.¹⁸ It is in this context that the ancestral dead are said, as among the Kroo of Liberia and Sierra Leone, to give children to their descendants.¹⁹ A natural corollary of this notion is that the living descendants are under a moral obligation to maintain sound ethical

¹⁴ Daryll Forde, *The Efik Traders of Calabar* (London, 1956).

¹⁵ Harris and Sawyerr, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁶ Eva Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana* (London, 1958), p. 97.

¹⁷ cf. Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism* (London, 1968), pp. 24, 90; L.V. Thomas "The Study of Death in Negro Africa", in Lalage Brown and Michael Crowther, *Proceedings of the First Congress of Africanists* (London, 1964), p. 152; Edwin Loeb, "Tribal Initiations and Secret Societies, *American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Vol. XXV, 1929, p. 264f; Kenneth Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone* (second edition, 1968), p. 122f; Colin Turnbull, *The Lonely African* (London, 1963), p. 131f.

¹⁸ J.R. Wilson Haffenden, *The Red Men of Nigeria* (London: 1930), p. 295 for a summary statement on this topic of Sawyerr, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁹ Weah Sawyerr and Harry Sawyerr, "Death", *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1963.

standards of which the deceased ancestors would approve. It is assumed that the ancestors exercise juridical authority over the living analogous to the authority they wielded during their lifetime. So they mete out punishments when they are neglected, or for misdemeanours on the part of the living. These take various forms: failure in business transactions, sickness, or, as among the Temnes, a poor catch of fish or a plague of mosquitoes. The various rites associated with the offering of sacrifices to the ancestral dead are born of this assumption: the ancestors must be kept happy and pleased with their descendants; otherwise they must be appeased.²⁰

The second notion is expressed both negatively and positively. Negatively, it is assumed that because the dead lie in the earth, the earth is corrupt and taboo: it is impregnated with death. Thus the Akan king must not touch the ground with his bare feet or his buttocks, because he must not come near death.²¹ Positively, it is felt that since grass and trees spring from the earth, life originates there. These two attitudes blend in the ideas associated with the death of a baby and its assumed return in the birth of its successor. So the Krio, for example, assume that when the first-born in a family dies, it is returned to its mother in a subsequent birth as a joint action of ancestors and the earth.²² The older generations of the Krio firmly believe that when a baby rolls off its bed, the earth (i.e., the floor of the house) moves up to catch it, and so prevents any serious physical injuries. We may say that the baby's muscles are soft and its bones gelatinous, but the Krio mammy would unremittently cling to her hallowed understanding of life.

Death as an Enemy

The death of the young, and particularly of children, is a grievous loss and terrible pain to their families. When, as in the case of families with an Rh blood problem, all babies after the first die in succession, the Yoruba, for example, postulate the existence of a troupe of mischievous spirit-children (*abiku*) who flock together, perhaps under an *iroko* tree, and one or another of them says, "I go to be born of X, but I will come back", each giving a time — after three months, after ten months, after three years. At the end of the stated period, these babies die and then meet again to revive their childish spirit-frolic. The Mende and the Krio hold that the same child keeps on being born and dying. To

²⁰ Harry Sawyerr, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

²¹ Meyerowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 88.

²² cf. Note 26.

prevent such successive deaths, mothers give their children talismanic names: the Yoruba and the Krio, *Bamidele*, meaning "Come, stay in my house", and *Bami-joko*, "Come sit with me"; the Mende, *Kula haa* – "Rags", i.e., death clothes; *Lombe*, "Stay to my benefit". Chinua Achebe gives a list of such Ibo names: *Onwumbiko*, "Death, I implore you"; *Ozoemena*, "May it not happen again"; *Onwuma*, "Death may please himself".²³

Death in action is naturally an enemy, and is often personified, for example among the Temnes. When someone dies, the Ibo of Nigeria run about wildly, slashing at trees and bushes, firing guns in the air, yelling their rage. The Acoli come to a "funeral – not the immediate burial – fully armed for war. They surround the grave and drive Death away from it with spear and shield", singing at the same time.²⁴ Although the Yoruba maintain that they scarify the corpses of *abiku* children so they will no longer be welcome among their spirit troupe, it seems truer to say that the scarification is intended to cheat death of a wholesome victim. Cognate with these attitudes is the belief, among the Yoruba for example, that it is a disgrace for a man to die without a male issue.²⁵ Death signifies a "process of diminishing strength".²⁶ A Temne myth relating to sickness and death confirms this notion. At the same time, man seeks to maintain the stability of his group in the face of the inevitable collapse, one after the other, of the individuals who compose it. Thus funeral rites, whether at the time of death or on a subsequent occasion, provide the group affected an opportunity of being together and becoming "conscious of itself once again".²⁷ The dancing and merriment indulged in by all but the closest relatives also restore this group consciousness and solidarity. They also seem to be intended to limit, and perhaps deny, the destructive powers of death over the group *per se*.²⁸ The larger a man's family, the bigger and more elaborate his funeral rites. The older he is, the greater the possibilities of mass hysteria during the performances. A man's social and political status also determines the largess provided for the rites. Dancing at funeral rites, like pace-makers for athletes, seems to be designed to give the deceased light feet for his journey to the other world. Dancing may take place

²³ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: 1969), p. 70.

²⁴ *Africa*, Vol. 38, 1968, p. 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁶ Lalage Brown and Michael Crowther, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

on the day of the funeral, as among the Akan²⁹, on the third day in the case of a woman, or on the fourth of a man, as among the Mende. Batratty reports that among the Akan, although there is much lamentation from the time of death until the day of the funeral, no crying is permitted at the *sora* rite, which is celebrated on the sixth day after death, "the day of rising".³⁰ At graveside ceremonies or other funeral libations, the Sierra Leone Krio do not permit any tears, even from a wife or daughter. The clan must assume courage, and demonstrate by it that the enemy has not routed them.

This re-grouping of the family and sometimes the clan leads to a further factor in burial rites. Among the Mende, for example, before the body is laid to rest relatives and friends gather around and recount their grievances against the deceased. Creditors demand payment of his debts, and a relative stands surety for them even if only nominally. All those whom the deceased has offended grant him free forgiveness, so that the curse generated by human ill-will does not pursue him beyond the grave.³¹ Other groups, for example the Yoruba and Akan, recount the activities of a deceased man, naming his faults and failures as well as his virtues.³² The reasoning which dictates this ritual seems obvious. The West African lives primarily not as an individual but as a member of a group consisting of living and dead members. At death he is parted from the segment of the living. So the surviving relatives and friends seek to set out his life history in such a way that ultimately he leaves behind a happy memory. But he must not be left to wander aimlessly in the still unknown land of the dead. Moreover, the band of those who have predeceased him must be encouraged to give him a warm welcome as he joins the family again. The Mende and the Akan, for example, give him a present to take to the fathers as he crosses the river. In every case it is hoped that he will join them in *lannya-golehum* or *Dada-golehum*, the City of the White Sand (the Mende), or *Orun Emin*, the "Good *Orun*", the "White *Orun*" (the Yoruba: *Orun* means heaven), or *samandow* (the Akan).³³ The whole clan of living and dead must hold together in the life on earth as well as in the life after death. So at ancestral rites when the ancestors are mentioned by name, there is always added a blanket invocation of "all you others whom we cannot now mention by name", to cover the recent dead who may have been omitted or the dead of

²⁹ R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: 1930, reprint), pp. 159, 163.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³¹ Harris and Sawyerr, *op. cit.*, p. 30f.

³² cf. *Africa*, Vol. 38, p. 67.

³³ cf. Harris and Sawyerr, *op. cit.*, pp. 30f, 136f; Idowu, *op. cit.*, pp. 197; Meyrowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

long ago whose names none of the living members of the family or clan can recall. The Krio have an amusing custom by which, while the spokesman is calling out the names of the dead, others present at the ceremony freely interject additional names so the list is as complete as possible. When no other name is forthcoming, they then employ the blanket formula mentioned above.³⁴

Death as Transformation

Particularly among groups like the Akan of Ghana, the Yoruba, and the Temne, who hold a theory of divine kingship, death is also believed to be a transformation. The Akan king was supposed to hold court in the kingdom of *Nyankopon*, and to exercise jurisdiction over the spirits of his former subjects. Danquah, for example, states that the *opanyi* (i.e., chief) who had led an exemplary life was deified at death.³⁵ Besides, the soul of an Akan king had bestowed upon it the sum total of the divine-rulership of his predecessors. For the rank and file members of the community, the Akan would say that, when a man's life-soul (*kra*) is full of goodness, it ceases to be subject to reincarnation, and becomes a guardian spirit of the family.³⁶ The Yoruba hold a like notion of the *ori*, which essentially represents a man's destiny. At death, it ultimately becomes the guardian angel of the surviving members of the family.³⁷

It is not easy to piece together into a simple statement the considerations which have led to some of the existing explanations of death. Suffice it to say that the death of an old person is accepted as a natural consequence of age. A man or woman who lives to a ripe old age goes through a manifest physical transformation, his powers fail, and life becomes a burden. The pregnant phrase "second childhood" summarizes how life comes full circle and virility yields to increasing infirmity. At death the transformation is complete. He now becomes spirit. As spirit the dead are nearer to God. So the Mende talk of those who died long ago as being in God's bosom. As a result of this proximity to God, they can now apprehend truth without being affected by personal prejudices.

³⁴ Harry Sawyerr "A Sunday Graveside Libation in Freetown after a Bereavement", *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 2. It should be noticed in this account that when living members of the family are mentioned, names are introduced by others than the principal speaker.

³⁵ Danquah, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

³⁶ Eva Meyerowitz, *Divine Kingship in Ghana and Ancient Egypt* (London: 1960), pp. 103-5.

³⁷ cf. Idowu, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

The Krio express this idea by referring to their dead ancestors as being in the world of truth (*tru wol*) The Yoruba appeal to them as impartial jurors to adjudicate between two contesting friends, while the Mende never do, so as not to induce them to take sides. In both cases, the ground of the attitude is the fact that the dead cannot but see the truth when an appeal is made to them.

The Origin of Death

Professor E.B. Idowu tells us that the Yoruba assume that death is the lot of a person of mature age. "Death is meant for the aged and ... given the right conditions, every person should live to a ripe old age".³⁸ So the Yoruba pray "that we may not die young: that we may not attain an old age of wretchedness".³⁹ However, death is a personified power believed to be created by and under commission from *Olodumare* (i.e., God).

The Temne of Sierra Leone maintain that at first death did not exist. Man lived on earth for a given number of years until God sent his messenger for him and he returned to God. One arrogant and conceited man however refused to accompany the messenger. So a year later God sent two messengers, a young man called Sickness who weakened the rebel, followed by an old man, Death, who took him away.⁴⁰ The Mende, also of Sierra Leone, say that there was no death in the primal days, but God sent a dog to the world with a message, "Life has come", and a toad saying, "Death has come". The two animals set off in a race. The dog, distracted by the smell of cooking, stopped at a house to eat while the toad went on. By the time the dog caught up with the toad, the people of the village had already been told, "Death has come, Death has come!" The dog's proclamation of life was too late to be effective.⁴¹ Other such stories abound all over West Africa. The obvious theme is that death is a contradiction of the hopes and aspirations of the living. The most virile man softens as he becomes ill and then dies. The baby with all the promise of life dies, and the promise is cut short, unfulfilled. Parents, relatives, wives, and children have to review the pattern of their life when the vigorous bread-winner dies and leaves a whole line of dependents unprovided for. At the same time, there lies implicit in the Temne

³⁸ Gerald Moore, "The Imagery of Death in African Poetry", *Africa*, Vol. 38, 1968, p. 68.

³⁹ Idowu, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁴⁰ J.H. Schlenker, *Temne Traditions, Fables* (London: 1864), pp. 25-29.

⁴¹ Harris and Sawyerr, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

and Mende myths the suggestion that death is the result of disobedience to God's will. In the one case, man's arrogance brings it about, and in the other, the dog's distraction from the race with the toad. In the one case, the man preferred not to leave the wealth he had acquired; in the other, the dog took time off to eat a bone.

The Death of God

At the same time, there is a strand of thinking which seeks to suggest that death stands over against God; indeed, it seems that God too was believed to be subject to death. However, this thought is rejected, perhaps because man revolts at the outcome of his thinking. We give two examples.

(a) The Akan have a saying that *Odamankoma*, the third name in their triadic deity, "created death, but death killed him". This difficult saying is countered by another which states that "it was none but *Odamankoma* who made Death eat poison"⁴²; that is to say, *Odamankoma* destroyed death. Danquah interprets the first statement to mean that *Odamankoma* represents "the totality of both being and non-being", and that "the mystery of life does not end in death but in life, the life that supersedes the death". He seems to be regarded as embodying in himself both life and death. It is possible that the notion of the death of *Odamankoma* derives from the daily circuit of the sun as it rises in the east and sets in the west to rise again the next day. In an agricultural community, the diurnal motions of the sun are symbolic of life and death. But plants seem to continue to grow during the night in spite of the lack of sunlight. Has this contradiction affected Akan thinking about God?

(b) The Yoruba are more subtle in stating this point. *Olodumare* is not said to have died. He is said to have visited a priest and offered a sacrifice, including a large piece of white cloth with which he later covered himself as a protection from death. He thus remained eternal and is envisaged as a hoary old man.⁴³

It is not easy to fathom the implications of these two examples. But one can reasonably conclude that a dualism is implicit in both myths, in spite of the explicit suggestion that God created all the spirit-influences in the world, as well as all the natural objects ranging from man to trees and rocks.

⁴² Danquah, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁴³ Idowu, *op. cit.*, p. 43f.

Conclusion

Death, it can be said, is regarded by the tribes of West Africa which have been mentioned as man's great enemy. Perhaps, apart from God, it is of all spiritual agencies the most dreaded. It seems capable of making it impossible for man to fulfil the destiny given him by God at birth. It frustrates man's well-laid plans and changes the future life of dependents of its victims. But death is thought of in another dimension also. The personality of man is not dissolved by death. Indeed, death seems to be regarded as a kind of catalyst which makes man's personality blossom to its fullest — whether for good or for evil. So the good man at his death continues to be good without the ethical distortions associated with moral evil. The wicked man can become evil without any redeeming spark of goodness to brighten up his character.

For those groups which postulate divine kingship, death is certainly a road to deification. There seems to be a widespread belief that the deceased ancestors, ruler and subjects alike, live close to God, thus possessing both omniscience and a full grasp of truth. At the same time, death is a cheat. It cheats babies and young people of the full span of life, depriving them of the good things of nature. It also cheats the family and the clan of love and service from the beloved. But the clan or family must not seem to be defeated by death; so funeral rites are performed to restore its confidence whenever one member dies. At the same time, the unity of the living with the dead members of a family or clan is ensured by messages or presents from the living sent through a deceased member to the larger section of the family on the other side. But this reunion is not automatic. Every deceased person faces a bar of judgement. Here difficulties arise. Wicked persons, if they can be identified as witches, are condemned immediately, and are given no chance to survive. The contradiction which results from the disaster of the termination of life on the one hand, and the hope of a continuation of the same life on the other, perhaps explains the postulation of the soul, or, as in the case of the Akan, two souls. So death occurs when the soul departs from the body. But what is the source of the soul? The answer to this question varies with different tribes. One common answer is, "It comes from God". So at death it goes back to God. How then can a clan soul-commune be postulated? For this the Akan postulate two souls, the one a spark of God (*Nyame*), the other an extension of the father. Other groups like the Mende and the Yoruba seem to postulate only one soul which comes from God and goes back to God, but also joins the family spirit-commune which is in close regular touch with the living. In every case the spirits or souls of the dead are pure. This purity is taken for granted by the Akan, but sometimes, as among the

Mende, gestures of spontaneous and voluntary forgiveness are offered to the dead so their souls can depart unencumbered by the sense of guilt which their unwitting actions may have caused. High-handed sins, usually described as witchcraft, are however not forgivable, except, as among the Akan, by the king. This attitude to witches, who ordinarily are believed to cause the death of children, to make men impotent and women barren, may suggest that a witch is seen as an incarnation of death or the principle of death. So while the burial rites for one approved by society are designed, through the inclusion of dances, to reassure the clan that they are not routed by death, the great enemy — the wicked — are dismembered or burned. They remain unmourned.

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A BLACK ASSESSMENT OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY MISSIONARIES

Lawrence B. Zulu

The nineteenth century witnessed a tremendous surge of the missionary spirit on the European continent, in America, and in Britain. Men, and later women, left their homes to bring the good news of salvation and the light of Christ to the darkness of heathen lands — India, China, Japan, the Pacific Islands, and Africa. South Africa received the legacy of churches, schools, and hospitals from this activity.

A Revolutionary Period

In many ways it would have been impossible for that century not to have seen this missionary activity: so many factors combined to give it a revolutionary character. There was the Evangelical Revival, which, along with Methodism, brought a renewed understanding of the relevance and power of the Gospel for man's condition of slavery to sin and suffering. The abolition of the slave trade, and more humanitarian legislation aimed at reforming parliament and easing the lot of the poor in Britain, were two of the by-products of this Revival.

The revolution in industry caused by the introduction of steam speeded up and made easier the production of goods. At the same time, machinery pushed a lot of people out of their jobs, thus creating the problem of unemployment. That in turn intensified the capital vs. labour

tension and conflict, leading to Marxist Communism in Germany and France, where the church failed to respond to the plight of the poor workers in their struggles against the capitalists, and to the Trade Union and Labour Movements in Britain, where the church championed the cause of the exploited. This same revolution led to improved methods of transport, and this at a time when the Napoleonic wars were introducing people to travel and the marvels of exploration, leading to the discovery and opening up of hitherto unknown parts of the world. Those who were told of these things — themselves aware of God's love for all his creatures — responded to a heartfelt desire to win these lands for Christ, just as their brothers were annexing them as colonies. It was a century of exploration, annexation, and colonization, as well as exploitation, in which the missionary, like his compatriots, sought to win the loyalty of the native races for his King and Kingdom. Moreover, the opening years of the century were the closing years of the French Revolution, with its passion for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Those who accepted these ideals desired to make them available to others who, they felt, needed them, and so became involved in the colonies of the empire-builders. When we consider that all these events and their after-effects took place not in orderly, pigeon-holed settings, but rather exerted their influence simultaneously on the people of the nineteenth century, we can appreciate how complex was the situation in which most of our country was evangelized. This in turn makes any assessment of missionary work as a whole — as distinct from the labours of any individual missionary — no easy task for a twentieth-century man, far removed from the circumstances under which this work was done.

Characteristics of a Mission-founded Church

The nineteenth-century missionaries planted the Christian religion in this country among the black people. The outward signs of this are the church buildings, ministers' houses, and what are still called mission stations. Along with the Christian religion, the blacks received the torn, divided church that Europe had come both to tolerate and to like. It is interesting that at this time little if anything was said about Christ being the foundation of the church's unity. Indeed, people were rigorously forbidden to worship in denominations other than their own.

That the Gospel was preached at all is one miracle that even now amazes me. Can you imagine yourself today going off to China or Japan, with no knowledge of the language, to proclaim Christ to those people? But somehow the missionaries did it. Whether they actually preached Christ — as did St. Paul — or merely inculcated the discipline that went

with the acceptance of Christ, is hard to determine. I cannot tell how much of the love of God was proclaimed to the black converts, and received by them, along with vivid descriptions of hell and punishment. In the same way, we can wonder to what extent the converts were led to know the church as the Body of Christ whose members are knit together, each contributing to the growth and maintenance of the Body from his own God-given resources. I do know, however, that the Christianity which has come down to our own day seems to be too bound up with the church building and the observance of Sunday. I know too that the Europe-linked churches have to struggle today to get black Christians to accept the cost of self-support and financial independence. Protests arise from people who inhabit houses they did not build, who worship in churches whose construction they did not finance, who eat fruits not of their own labours. The ambiguous status of mission station lands in this black and white country of ours makes one wonder in whose name they were originally set apart, and for what reasons. But each case needs to be settled on its own merits on the basis of historical research.

One other mark of the missionary-founded church is the absence of missionary zeal. Reading most of the literature — diaries, letters, journals, and reports — I cannot help feeling that the missionaries planted here a static sort of Christianity centred solely on the individual and stressing the role of the institution — the church building, Sunday worship, and the sacraments. This same literature reflects an attitude of superiors dealing with inferiors, whom they pitied, sometimes despised, and often found enigmatic in spite of their apparent simplicity. There seems to have been little appreciation of the cultural setting that could have helped in the proclamation of the Gospel. For example, coming to blood-shedding cultures, they failed to speak arrestingly of the blood of Christ, shed for us and for all men for the remission of sins. What a lost opportunity to proclaim meaningfully the saving death of Christ!

The terms "native" and "colonist" seem to have been useful for keeping the church divided along racial lines. So it is not surprising to find the Secretary of the Student Christian Association commenting in 1911 on the evangelization of South Africa: "While South Africa may not be destined to be a white country in the sense of New Zealand or Canada, it would be a flagrant mistake to cherish for it any lower ideal than the domination of white principles. To secure this, the ideal as contained in a small white minority must be kept high and pure." The scheme was to evangelize South Africa, which in turn would penetrate and bring the Gospel as far north as central Africa. But was that sort of missionary church ever created among the blacks? I doubt it. For central to the idea of the church is the oneness of the people of God: among

them there is neither Jew nor Gentile. Let any church lose this, and it ceases to be the church. Missionary and convert are fellow workers with and under God, with no distinction, even of status.

The Contribution of Education and Medicine

The legacy of schooling has not been buildings only, but well-educated blacks, and the awakening of the majority to the value and necessity of education. The first university for blacks was established by missionaries, and its record has been admirable well beyond the borders of South Africa. Here the missionary gave the best he could afford, encouraging parents to grant permission for their children to be educated. Further, the training of black teachers, imbued with high ideals about the uplifting and progress of the entire black nation, helped make education attractive to young blacks. It was from among these educated young men and women that efforts arose to develop the black man culturally, economically, socially, and politically. Somehow it was here that the missionary scaled the heights, even more than in the area of religion. His products became pioneers, working, often quite successfully, for nominal pay, amid ignorance and hostility, to sell the idea of education to their own people. And the education was not all the pencil-and-paper kind: there was handwork, domestic science, carpentry, and gardening — all things which our generation is the poorer for not doing to the same extent. So it is not surprising that the awakening of the blacks came largely through this avenue, where the great dreams were really dreamed, and where teacher and pupil strove together in a joint enterprise to enable the latter to reach his full capacity. "As my father has loved me, so have I loved you: abide in my love." The Adams Mission and others stand as memorials to this achievement of the missionaries of the last century. The increasing number of young men and women in universities and other institutions of learning is testimony to their devotion, and the insistence of the blacks — even as they became more and more anti-white — on using English as the medium of instruction is a lasting tribute to their efforts.

Hospitals in this country were until recently the step-children of the missionary movement. They, like the schools, were efforts to incarnate love for the suffering people. But in contrast to the teachers, the hospital staff adopted an attitude of scorn for the ideas and beliefs of the blacks. Consequently the fight against disease was distorted into a fight against "witch doctors". The result was the creation among the blacks of a pseudo-intellectualism which found expression in scornful remarks about black medical practice. This precluded any dialogue between

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European and African medicine, to the impoverishment of both. The church, poised between these two warring camps, spoke with a divided voice. In the resulting confusion it lost its own understanding of health and of the healing ministry of Christ, and is now finding it difficult to recover this talent given it by God for use in his service and to his glory. Today hospitals stand throughout this land, testifying both to the love of God for mankind and to mankind's failure to speak and to listen, to engage in what we call dialogue. The groans within their walls witness to the new nation-in-Christ struggling to be born within the harmony of black and white that only Christ can bring: "For he is our peace, who has made both to be one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition."

Missionaries in the Political Setting

I shall conclude this assessment with a look at the missionaries of the nineteenth century within the political setting of South Africa at that time. I sincerely believe that most — if not all — faced a real dilemma. They were white, and subjects of their home countries, to which they owed some measure of loyalty. Moreover, they were dependent on the colonial government officers for protection in case of war and other disturbances. As such they were strangers here. At the same time they had come as servants of Christ, to convert the heathen blacks to him. "You cannot serve God and Mammon." Everything was all right when in the eyes of the missionaries the state officials were ruling the natives justly. But when they saw injustice being done by the whites to the blacks, whose side were they to be on? Naturally the decision of each individual was influenced by his attitude to both sides in time of peace, as well as by his degree of integrity and independence as a person. Some became pseudo-colonialists, using religion to subdue the blacks to white rule, while others stood out against their compatriots in opposition to such abuses. Others opted out, preferring to eschew the dirty game of politics, and to point their converts to the skies whence comfort would come. People who were adults by the second decade of the present century will recall the bitterness with which the missionary who volunteered information on how the government authorities could "deal with the natives" came to be regarded by the blacks. Today it is said that they made us pray while they were stealing our land. But this forgets people like the Colensos and members of the London Missionary Society.

The nineteenth-century missionaries stand as a challenge to our generation by their achievements in the face of great odds, and as a warning to the church of our day by their failure to hold a dialogue with the people they sought to convert.

HAS CHRISTIANITY ANY RELEVANCE AND ANY FUTURE?

David Thebehali

The arrival of missionaries in South Africa coincided with the first occupation of the Cape by the British. Several historians have seen the activities of the missionaries as part of the expansion of the newly founded capitalist system. The role of the missionaries was seen as two-fold: evangelizing the "barbarians and savages", and extending the British Empire. In overseas countries Wilberforce was hailed as the great liberator of the oppressed, but in England he was very unpopular with the workers, because he supported oppressive laws and denounced trade unions as "a general disease in our society". In a pamphlet entitled "A Practical View of the System of Christianity", he wrote that it teaches the poor to be diligent, humble, patient, and obedient, and to accept their lowly position in life. It makes the inequalities between the rich and the poor less obvious, because under the influence of religious instruction the poor endure the injustices of this world with the hope of a rich reward in heaven. Wilberforce regarded this as the "basis of all politics".

So Wilberforce, with his group of industrialists and Cambridge divines, expounded clearly the role the missionary was to play in Africa. These men were the products of a capitalist Christian civilization that unhesitatingly found religious justification for inequality — a position that prevails to this day. The missionary proponents of these ideas were a powerful instrument for extending the British Empire. In researches in

South Africa. Dr. Phillip observed that "while our missionaries ... are everywhere scattering the seeds of civilization ... they are extending British interests, British influence, and the British Empire... Whenever the missionary places his standard among a savage tribe, their prejudices against the colonial government give way, their dependence upon the colony is increased by the creation of artificial wants... Industry, trade, and agriculture spring up." The process of Christianization was coupled with the founding of industries. Having accepted the man of God, the convert had a strong urge to imitate his teacher: the wheels of industry were oiled with more land, raw material, and cheap labour. And soon the indigenous people found that the new society had destroyed the habits, customs, and ideas of the old.

One of the most powerful weapons used by the missionaries was that of divide and rule. At the outset the missionary approached the chief humbly, Bible in hand, and asked for a piece of land where he could set up his mission station. This was then used to undermine the authority of the chief. Ndlamhe, the formidable Xhosa chief, refused to allow the whites to use the Fish River as a temporary boundary. The only way they were able to force him to his knees was by splitting the Xhosa people: they exploited the domestic feud between Ndlamhe and his nephew Ngqika, who joined forces with the white man to destroy his own people. One missionary used the mission-controlled Hottentots to fight against the independent Khoikhans.

The Political Role of Missionaries

In their political role, the missionaries were set on destroying the influence and power of the chief as a military leader of his people. The breakdown of tribalism — a vital economic necessity — required the removal of allegiance to the chief. The black converts were put up near the mission station, where they were separated from their own people. It was only much later that the chief realized that the man of peace, the man of God, constituted a danger to his own position. Once they had established good relations with the chief, the missionaries persuaded him to accept the friendship of the British government, and then to become a salaried chief. (At one point Dr. Phillip remarked, "Had a few of the chiefs been subsidized by having small salaries paid to them, we might by this time have had the Kaffir land in our own hands.") The salaried chief was then given an adviser who, after he had successfully undermined the influence of the chief, was made a magistrate. Finally the chiefs realized that the white men meant "to steal our people and become magistrates and chiefs themselves".

After the black people had been defeated militarily and in other ways by the first generation of missionaries — so-called humanitarians — the second generation carried forward the process of political and economic enslavement. The discovery of diamonds and gold opened up new possibilities for development in commerce and industry. Cheap black labour had to be exploited to the maximum, and politicians were soon talking about “the native question” and “the native problem”. Rhodes, speaking of a bill to disenfranchise the blacks, said:

It is a perfect farce to call this bill an interpretation of the Constitution Ordinance. I prefer to call a spade a spade... It is the basis upon which we shall come to govern the country... Let us boldly say: ‘In the past we have made mistakes about native representation... We intend now to change all that...’ You say: ‘We are going to be lords of this people and keep them in subjection... They should not have the franchise because we don’t want them on an equality with us.’ Now, my honourable friends are right in their views on the Native question... I have made up my mind that there must be class legislation, that there must be Pass Laws and Peace Prevention Acts (depriving blacks of guns), and that we have got to treat natives where they are in a state of barbarism in a different way to ourselves. We are to be lords over them. These are my politics on native affairs, and these are the politics of South Africa. The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise... We must adopt a system of despotism, such as works so well in India, in our relations with the barbarians in South Africa.

It is apparent that the missionaries were in a hurry to extend the British Empire, and in the process they encouraged apartheid. The residential segregation they pursued — very unjustifiably in light of the teachings of the Bible — was interpreted by blacks as aloofness. The missionaries failed to strive by example rather than by precept to commend the Christian religion to the inhabitants. They also failed to deserve the name given them by the blacks: “God’s men”. Further, the missionaries insisted on having a mission station apart from the people. This tended to create a gulf between the Christians and the non-Christians. The chief became insecure, as the converts cut themselves off from the community, and put themselves under the new authority of the missionaries. It was they, for example, who settled the feuds and quarrels.

The missionaries were better educated, better housed, and more adequately remunerated than the local church leaders, and were able to maintain a standard of living reasonably in keeping with that of their home countries. The Africans were in an inferior position, and the dual standard has survived. Residential segregation was accompanied by colour prejudice, a sense of racial superiority, and discrimination. The missionaries preached universal brotherhood and service to mankind, but I found it strange how the tenets of Christianity seemed to yield to man-made laws and regulations. The black man feels even more alienated

from the missionary when his would-be benefactor approaches him in a patronizing manner. That which is best in him rebels against paternalism. The superiority complex reflected in the missionaries' judgment that everything black is inferior has no place in Christianity.

The Failure to Relate to Indigenous Beliefs and Worship

Over the years there has been a sustained plea for a more adequate approach by the missionaries to the traditional religion; their deafness to this imperative has prefaced the failure of their interpretation of Christianity. They failed to study the indigenous beliefs and to discover for themselves the "mine of truth and inspiration" in them. What a different state of things would have prevailed if the missionaries had tried to understand the blacks' own religious system before trying to improve on it, or, even more, before introducing a new one. Except for the name "God", which was adopted and re-interpreted, all concepts associated with the indigenous religions were made taboo by the missionaries. The focal point of these beliefs was reverence for the ancestors, and the failure of the missionaries to re-interpret this and make it part of the new Christian belief must be viewed as a serious error. In no area of his life is a black man more devoted to the traditions of his forefathers than in matters of faith. Because of the strong role played by the ancestors in the life and worship of African people, it is extremely difficult, especially for the so-called "uncultured native", ever to forsake absolutely the gods of his forefathers. And why should he? When he comes to examine the teachings of the missionaries, he finds much that is unsuitable to his condition, and that he is required to give up practices which to a scientific mind may seem barbarous, but which when examined critically contain a "mine of truth and inspiration". The black man believes in the world of spirits. He believes that the spirit of man never dies. So vivid is this faith that he holds open and "direct communion with his dead friend, not through a medium but, as it were, face to face". The white churches in Africa have never respected or tolerated the traditional beliefs or institutions of black society. The missionaries have refused to acknowledge the truth, the faith, and the philosophy of black religion.

The best example of western rites imposed on blacks is Christian marriage. The meddlesome missionaries and pastors persuaded the colonial governments to legislate against polygamy, thus forcing a life of hypocrisy upon those whom they had "Christianized". Before he came into the church, the average so-called convert was living a fairly decent open life in respect to his marital relations. But embracing Christianity invariably meant that he must adopt "subterfuge and chicanery to cover up

the ways of his old life which not all the spiritual graces could help him brush aside". It was unwise for the missionaries thus recklessly to break down black social institutions and to superimpose on their ruins white social institutions. What is the effect of Christianity on social institutions? In other words, can a black man become a Christian and still remain a black man?

There has been an even greater reaction against the imposition of western arts, music, dress, instruments, architecture, and religious symbolism on the forms of worship. Why, for example, should not a black convert sing his own native songs and play his native airs in church? Why should he not make use of his own musical instruments to praise God, much as the Israelites of old praised Jehovah "with harp and cymbal"? Again, why should not a black man be called to church by a big drum, as he was generally called to any public meeting? Why in the name of reason and common sense should not a black man bear his own name, and wear his own garments? Why indeed, other than that the simple missionaries had from the beginning ruled that all these things were against the spirit of the Gospel which they saw as inalienably wedded to their western culture.

A Black Religion for Black Men

We have fought courageously for what we deemed to be our ancestral rights, and we must continue to fight. But the greatest calamity which threatens us — one which must be combatted tooth and nail — is the loss of ourselves. Let them rob us of our lands, but let us see that they do not rob us of ourselves. They have taught us to despise our black names, our black institutions, our black customs, our black laws — everything black was called heathen, wrong, and ungodly, even when it did not in any way conflict with the Christian faith. Our very names, which had deep meaning and spiritual significance in the black culture, were designated as pagan, and we were given European or American names, as if biblical or white names were a necessary passport to the Kingdom of God! Our dances were tabooed, our customs discarded, and all that was best in our system was forgotten, with baneful results.

I sincerely believe that a little less Roman Catholicism, a little less Anglicanism, a little less Lutheranism, would do no harm, and a little more "Blackism" would do a great deal of good. Christianity, which at present has an active element in favour of maintenance of the *status quo*, must lose its European form and colour; it must become a black religion for black men, as it is today a white religion for the whites. In order to achieve this, in order that Christianity may have relevance for and a

future among the black people of South Africa, complete separation between black and white churches is of great importance and must be seriously studied. Has the time not come for the establishment of a Black National Church which will be a symbol of the fulfilment of the aspirations of the black people? For how long are we going to allow and encourage white Christianity to cloud our sense of black direction? Don't you think that in our own black churches there would be full scope for self-development, freedom of expression, and the growth of creative leadership? Has the time not arrived to evangelize and Christianize the white man?

JESUS AND BLACK OPPRESSION

Basil Moore

Everything about Jesus has its first point of reference, and thus primary basis of interpretation, in the religious, ethical, and political cross-currents of first century Jewish people under Roman colonial rule. This point is vital. Christianity takes its character from being in history. It is not the filtering through of eternal truths from an uncorrupted, unpopulated, and unpolitical paradise. There are always two sides to communication: there is what the speaker intended to communicate, and what the hearer understood to be the message. What the hearers hear will be as situational as what the speaker said. They will hear against the backdrop of their beliefs, needs, aspirations. Now the words of Jesus reach us not only through this first filter of the hearers, but also through the filter of the fact that they were not written for first century Jews, to whom Jesus spoke, but largely for Greeks and Romans. And then, equally important, we have to hear through the filter of our own historical and social situation.

So the Gospel always was and always will be situational. This is its eternal relevance. If you want a relevance tied to no time and no place, then you don't want a Christ. Accepting the situational character of Jesus for his first interpreters — and his South African followers — the idea of a black theology ceases to be theological emotionalism. Black theology has to ask: at what crucial points does the human situation of blacks in South Africa fit in with the human situation of Jesus in

Roman-occupied Israel? What message of hope did Jesus have for his contemporaries whose situation parallels that of black South Africans? How can black South Africans interpret that message and translate it into Christian action in their situation? Or, to put it differently, black theology is applying what we hear to be the message and actions of Jesus to the situation of black people in South Africa.

Jesus: First-Century Jew with His Back to the Wall

He was poor

The first important situational fact about Jesus is that he was poor. Luke records that at the dedication of Jesus at the Temple his parents accepted that according to the law they had to offer as sacrifice a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. What the law required under normal circumstances was a year-old lamb, and either a turtledove or a young pigeon; if the family was too poor, they could bring two young pigeons. It is clear from this that Jesus' parents were too poor to afford a lamb.

If Mary and Joseph were poor, so also were the vast majority of the people of Israel, and so certainly were the early followers of Jesus. After the Roman conquest of Israel in 63 B.C., the humiliating loss of status and independence was etched deeper and deeper into the soul of the people. Taxes of all kinds increased, to glorify Rome and its Emperor, and to reduce the possibility of effective mass resistance. A list of the *élite* rich in Jesus' Israel would have consisted of the Roman civil and military leaders, possibly a few apostate Jewish tax collectors, and perhaps some of the religious leaders. For the rest, mere existence was a grinding, day-to-day struggle.

That it was among the poor that Jesus did his main work is clear from the list of his disciples, which included struggling fishermen and at least one fanatical Zealot. Even the late letter of James is addressed to the poor, living under the crushing oppression of the rich, counselling strongly against an easy acceptance of the rich into the Christian fellowship and any pandering to their fads. The fact that Jesus was himself a poor man, and that it was the poor who clung eagerly to him and his words, gives us a vital clue in our interpretation. The poor must have found in him a realistic message of hope. What that message was remains to be discovered. Was he a moral reformer, who they hoped would bring moral pressure to bear upon the rich to be more free with their charitable hand-outs to the poor? Or was he more revolutionary

than this? Obviously the answer to this question is very relevant, for Jesus, by his poverty, stands identified with the vast mass of men on earth. What has he to say to them?

He was deprived of his rights as a citizen

The second crucial situational fact about Jesus was that he was living in the land of his birth, deprived of his rights as a citizen by white western rulers from Rome. He was one of those people who had no say in determining the laws by which he had to live — not that Israel was a democracy before Rome came, but at least its rulers were Jews with whom there was a deep-seated bond. He was also one of those people whose religious sensitivities were insulted by Roman temples in honor of Augustus Caesar rising up on the holy land itself. And he was one of those who could be degraded freely by a Roman — if he was pushed into the gutter by a Roman, he could make no appeal. He was just another Jew in the gutter.

It is important to note here a huge difference between Jesus and Paul. Paul, the first great interpreter of Jesus, was also a Jew, but he was a free Jew. He was a Roman citizen. He shared the blood and religion of the colonized Jews, but the status and privilege of the ruling Romans. If he was ill-treated by a Roman soldier, his highly valued Roman citizenship guaranteed him a hearing. Although there is only one recorded incident in which Paul used this privilege, it was always available in any emergency. Paul's status was so utterly different from that of Jesus that we should be very cautious in using Paul as a reliable interpreter of Jesus' attitude towards the state. To be sure, there is in Paul a great deal about a new society of free men in Christ, which transcends the barriers of race, class, sex, and privilege. But not surprisingly there is also another side — a divine legitimizing of the *status quo*: slaves are counselled to be good slaves and to obey their masters: all civil government is ordained by God, and the "haves" should be generous in giving to the "have nots". It is this side of Paul's presentation of the Christian message which is always available to those who want divine sanction for humiliating and oppressing their fellows.

He lived in revolutionary Galilee

Jesus lived in a society in which violent revolutionaries were active, and where counter-revolutionary moves were brutal. In Galilee, the Zealot Judas lay siege to the armoury at Sepphoris, and after capturing the weapons led an army against Rome. He failed, and the whole city of

Sepphoris was regarded as hostage. The army moved in, the city was burned to the ground, and men, women, and children were killed. Sepphoris was near Nazareth, the early home of Jesus. Josephus, a Jew and a Pharisee with overt Roman sympathies, who later became a Roman citizen, writing in his *Antiquities of the Jew*, tells of the Jewish struggle for freedom which ended in their final humiliation in A.D. 70 when the Temple was sacked. He tells how there were no fewer than ten thousand violent disorders in Judaea. Apparently the calm hills of Galilee were alive with guerilla fighters, plotting, scheming, and acting for freedom. Josephus reports that in these hills the Romans ran to earth a Zealot family. His wife and children begged him to surrender, but instead the Zealot stood at the mouth of the cave and killed them all as they came out. He then committed suicide, and "so underwent death rather than slavery". The usual form of Roman reprisal against the Zealot was crucifixion. So the cross was a badge of Zealot defiance long before it became a Christian symbol.

Although the Gospel tells us little about this revolutionary Galilee, it is impossible to believe that Jesus was ignorant of it and had nothing relevant and meaningful to say about it. Attempting to interpret Jesus in this situation of his day is inordinately difficult. By the time the Gospels were written, the Jewish revolt against Rome had ended, or, in the case of Mark, was about to end. They were written to present Jesus as the Saviour of the world, at a time when Jews were scattered, and revolt had little meaningful relation to a world where the Romans were undeniably masters. Mark wrote primarily for Roman readers, and Jewish leaders are painted in the worst colours. And the letters of Paul were addressed not to Christians who might have been involved in the struggle in Israel for political freedom, but to men in Asia and the west.

Where did Jesus stand on the most pressing issue of his day, the issue of the politically dispossessed and the violent fight for freedom? He emerges as identified with the poor and politically disinherited of his day, in a situation which was bubbling and seething with violent unrest in the struggle for freedom. How closely does his situation parallel that of the black people in South Africa?

Jesus and the South African Blacks

The first important situational fact about the black man in 1970 South Africa is that he is poor. He is degradingly, cripplingly, inhumanly, starvantly poor. Fifty percent of black children die before reaching the age of five, and fifty percent of black school children suffer from various

malnutrition diseases. Of course there is laziness, some "won't work" attitude, drunkenness, and ignorance. But these are more often the effect of poverty and not its cause. They are also often the result of despair in a particular political blind alley. The historical and contemporary cause of black poverty is political. It began when western, Christian whites, with their love of slavery, first met heathen blacks on the southern tip of Africa. Here they found a ready supply of slaves which, together with the availability of land and the challenge to Christian missionary zeal, became a major inducement to white settlers from Britain and the continent. Not only did they find slaves, they also bred their own from Hottentot, Bushman, and black women. So slavery came to Southern Africa with the advent of the white man and the Bible. After emancipation, and the reluctant capitulation of the British colony in the cape, the rugged Boers, no nigger lovers, found in the Old Testament a valuable ally in their attempt to keep their black slaves. When they were defeated legally and politically in their struggle, they trekked north with a proud, defiant, and independent spirit. Here the Bible lessons they had learned stood them in good stead. They saw themselves as the people of Israel, leaving the tyranny of Egypt, and destined by God to claim for him the new promised land of the Canaanites. That the Canaanites were black meant only that they were the sons of Ham, destined forever to be the hewers of wood and the drawers of water for God's chosen white Boers. The blacks could not counter the impressive military might of these invaders. Without land or power, they were excluded from participation in the white Republics that were established, and a poverty-stricken disinheritance became their lot. How can you be rich in an agricultural economy if you can own no land? And how do you get land if you have no political rights?

So it happened and so it remains. Slavery has gone, but in its place has come a politically sanctioned, sophisticated slavery. The whites own all the land, apart from the small tracts they half-give to the blacks and on which they enforce disastrous over-population. Here they set up breeding grounds of cheap labour which could be brought, without families, into the white-owned cities and industries. So blacks are kept poor for the sake of white power and white gain. Jesus and the suffering blacks of South Africa bend low under the same suffocating burden of politically inspired poverty. They also share the terrifying insecurity of living in a political no-man's-land, of being political non-entities.

We have seen that Jesus lived in a situation of revolutionary violence and anti-revolutionary counter-violence. With at least one Zealot in his party, he could not possibly have been unaware of the plotting and scheming. Walking around Galilee, he must have seen the avenues lined with Roman crosses bearing the dead and dying who had failed in their

attempts to wrest freedom for their people. Blacks in South Africa also live with occasional outbreaks of revolutionary violence and massive anti-revolutionary counter-violence: with imprisonment without trial, with bannings and house-arrests, with whites-only military training. Blacks can be imprisoned or condemned to death under laws they never made, and which the vast majority never wanted — at least nobody ever bothered to find out whether they wanted them or not. What does Jesus have to say to blacks with their noses in the dirt, whose patience wears thinner as their anger mounts?

Occasionally from dwellings where poverty has lifted a little, the most exquisite, violent, sweating-body jazz can be heard. But generally a dark futility hangs over the damp houses with dung floors. In these human garbage heaps, which border the white areas, what creative human potential has been smothered — poets, playwrights, philosophers, musicians, dancers — all those prophets and rallyers of the human spirit. It appears as if the tragically predictable has happened. The combination of white and black "thingness" has eaten away the heart of the people, leaving only a withered kernel. It is like cracking open a walnut and finding that a worm has eaten away the promise. Here hunger and despair and thingness are too real for the creative spirit to take wings and fly. It is small wonder that some men are crying-angry at this assassination-cum-suicide of the sense of manhood which is the *sine qua non* of prophetic art.

In this cultural context, what is the message of Jesus? How does it come to these non-people blacks?

The Jesus-message through the White South African Filter

The hand-out interpretation

As closely as Jesus fits the situation of South African blacks, so also his Roman rulers fit the situation of South African whites. I know of no church that is not intellectually concerned about black poverty in South Africa. Some churches and ecumenical agencies are involved in relief work, though few, if any, spend as much on relief as they do on organization, buildings, and furnishings. On the question of poverty, it would undoubtedly be true to say that the white interpretation of the Jesus-message is relief. Perhaps the favourite Bible passage on this theme is the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me food". The wealthy and well-fed white congregations are exhorted to see Christ himself in the poor and hungry black men. As the sheep of the parable were rewarded for sharing their goods with

the suffering poor, so now the comfortable whites are promised that if they will but share something of their goods with Christ in the miserable blacks, then they too will be counted among God's good sheep destined for eternal blessing.

Without questioning this interpretation at this point, a number of things need to be noted. The first is the political character of black poverty. No matter how generous the hand-out, it will not make one iota of difference to the politics that breeds the poverty. It may feed one empty belly for one day. It may even feed 10,000 empty bellies for one week. But it will not fill nine and a half million empty bellies from Sunday to Saturday from birth to the grave! These bellies are empty because it is necessary to keep economic progress down to a rate that will maintain a vast reserve of unemployed labour to choke any possibility of a collective action by workers to secure better wages or working conditions. The dock workers strike in Durban was rendered totally ineffective by blacks clawing at each other to get the jobs lost by their brothers as a result of their actions.

Does the white church see the Jesus-message as having anything to do with changing the face of black poverty? It does not seem so, or we should expect to see it involved in the messy business of political economics as well as realistically busy about the far easier and very necessary first-aid work.

The second thing to be noted about this moralistic message of hand-outs by the wealthy is that both rich and poor are necessary to make it practicable. The rich must remain rich, or get richer still, so that the poor can always be with them to receive their bounty. Now the rich have the moral message of Jesus all buttoned up — give a little excess to some recognized charity rather than to the tax man, and you're a sheep destined for eternal leisure. For the poor this is a message without any ray of hope.

The third thing to note about this hand-out interpretation is that it can shatter the receiver's pride and dignity. Many are the white Christians who would dig tolerably deeply into their pockets to feed or clothe a black man, woman, or child. Few indeed are the white Christians who would tolerate the presence of a black man in their churches, homes, or social gatherings. Giving relief relieves white consciences; it has nothing whatever to do with treating the black person as a person, with the rich potential of his becoming a rewarding personal friend. So the black is treated as a belly to be filled, a back to be shirted, or a body to be warmed. He is still a *thing*. This hideous dehumanization may not be intended: the intentions are most kindly. It is the conditions that go with the giving that show it for what it is. The kindly hand-out interpretation of the parable of the sheep and goats hammers

home with sickening force in South Africa that the poor black can be exploited so long as you spare him a crumb of your riches, and that he can fill his belly with your hand-outs so long as he does not expect you to fill your heart with his being.

The Jesus-message to the poor black is, "Be patient, friend. We will try to squeeze some more money out of the rich whites for you with our moralizing sermons and study groups. But don't expect too much. If you expect us to get all messed up in trying to change the total structures of your economic enslavement, you have come knocking at the wrong door". They are right. How could white churches do anything more? They themselves pay their black staff half the wages paid the white staff for the same work. So the Jesus-message as it peeps out through the filter of the white church in words, attitudes, and actions is a message which has no hope inside it for the black man with his nose in the dung.

Divine sanction for the "whites only" democratic system

And what is the message of the white church in word and deed about the question of political disinheritance? In the liberal churches, where black membership still outweighs by far white membership, ecclesiastical power rests smugly and undeniably in the hands of whites. To be sure, there are few blacks who are able to handle western-style economic and business procedures, or to teach academics nurtured in the west. But few whites would feel at home in traditional African social, religious, philosophical, or artistic systems. And who has decided whether African or western ways are better suited to the church in South Africa? Have not the churches argued from the effects of disinheritance to maintaining disinheritance? This is sick logic. The spoken message differs very little from this structural one. The liberal white churches occasionally, less often now than a few years ago, throw up their hands in righteous indignation about the disinheritance of the blacks. They used to pass resolutions condemning the government for its increasing insistence on separation, coupled with denial of more and more civil liberties to the blacks. The message of opposition was never accompanied by serious onslaughts on the increasing separation in Christian congregations. The black man is not welcome at white hymn-singing and praying, and he knows it, so when it really comes to the crunch on the question of political disinheritance of the blacks, it is not surprising that in the white churches Christ speaks through Paul.

There is the famous occasion in which Jesus was asked about Jews paying taxes to the Romans. He replied that Caesar should be given

what belongs to him, while God should be given what is his. Paul comes to the rescue in interpreting this enigmatic saying. It is assumed that, like Paul, Jesus was asserting the God-given right of any government to rule. Few of us would go as far as Paul and divinize a particular ruling party at a particular time, but infinitesimal would be the number who would question the political procedures by which a particular party is established in power. Even conceding that "democracy" in South Africa cannot lay claim to being a national ballot-box democracy of the normal western ilk, it is by these voting procedures alone that orderly, undistruptive change is to be brought about. It may not be said very often, but no South African white church would question that the voting paper is the major divinely-appointed way of exercising political power and expressing Christian support or dissent. This means that, for every social, political, and economic change, it is the whites who must set the pace. Further, it is the whites who will set the conditions. Thus the message of divine sanction of present democratic procedures has locked within it the practical implication of the preservation of the *status quo*. It is no viable message of social hope to South Africa's disinherited. The result of interpreting the message of Jesus as proclaiming the divinely ordained legitimacy of the existing system of government is that the black is still the receiver of the white hand-out. He dare not claim the right to be an initiator. But freedom can never be given to a man: it is something that has to happen on the inside. He has to free himself, and then express his freedom by asserting himself as a responsible human being.

Blacks in North America have had to learn this. They were not free when slavery was abolished. All they could do was to accept the white gift, but they certainly were not free to express themselves in the still white-dominated and prejudiced society. But freedom is happening now, as they are asserting their own humanity. Now that they are taking pride in their humanity, they are able to take pride also in their blackness: "Black is beautiful". And they mean to ensure that their presence and their will are felt and responded to: "Black Power". To think that South African blacks should be grateful for the efforts of the few whites who are trying to use the present structures of the democratic process is to suppose that they should be happy about this particular style of paternalism. Why should they be happy that some whites on the one hand recognize that black rights were stolen from them by whites, and then, on the other hand, fall down to worship before the "democratic system" in which all the dice are loaded against the blacks? Why should blacks be elated that some whites want freedom for blacks on white terms? If whites recognize that blacks have the right to civil inheritance in South Africa, then if whites are not immediately to degrade them by dictating the terms, they must recognize also that it is for the blacks to

determine the means to their freedom. Is it claiming too much to say that the white church does not really take the situation of the disinherited seriously? Is this the white interpretation of the message of Jesus to the blacks?

The love ethic all fouled up

Thirdly, what is the white churches' message about Jesus and the disruptive anger of South African blacks? Undoubtedly the message is terribly confused. Clearly the love ethic is the main verbal message. To hate a man, to injure him, to force him to do something, to be angry with him, and to kill him — all these are seen to be incompatible with the command that we should love both our neighbours and our enemies. But the positive content of this gets all fouled up in the practical application. To love one's black fellow Christian does not involve meeting him either socially or at worship. He must remain outcaste from white society. Then how can whites love him?

To love one's fellow man certainly does not appear to be incompatible with shooting him in a bloody war. There may be a few very genuine Christian pacifists, but always some immediate socio-political issue has been used to justify the use of violence as necessary to halt some disastrous evil. It is recognized that love ought to be the only weapon with which to fight for the good of society. At the same time, it is recognized that the love armoury of the other side, always the other side, is empty. Thus force is accepted as tragically necessary. And love has never appeared to be incompatible with violent reprisals. Despite Christ's drastic revision of the *lex talionis*, Christians have made very sporadic and very pathetic attempts to rid any country of capital punishment. Few South African Christians would condemn the killing of guerilla fighters in Rhodesia, Mozambique, or Angola. Even fewer would object to the (preferably legal) killing of any who in South Africa itself resort to violence to alter the dehumanizing situation of the disinherited blacks.

The message seems to be: Love is incompatible with directly and intentionally doing violence to any man. But if I am threatened in my security and freedom, or if any man does violence to me, then to react violently is justifiable. The implication of this is that violence to protect and entrench the political *status quo* is justifiable, though not a full expression of the Christian love ethic, but unconstitutional violence to bring about change in the *status quo* is never justifiable. Is this really what the love ethic of Jesus is all about?

Not free to be a man

Finally, what is the message of the white churches on treating blacks as "things". No church would dare today to make the claim that when *homo sapiens* has black skin pigmentation he is merely a thing. No church could claim that and claim also to be Christian. In fact, the white churches are vociferous in their assertion that blacks are also human beings. In the light, however, of what we have seen to be the message of the white churches on the questions of poverty, disinheritance, and deification of the "whites only" democratic system, it is clear that blacks are not *really* accepted as persons. At best they are wayward and backward children who need the leadership of their parent/guardians.

Whites, both Christian and otherwise, can be expected to object violently to this analysis. One can almost hear them saying: "Your analysis is so terribly negative. You have not taken into account the positive advances, such as economic and industrial development, that have come to the southern tip of Africa with the advent of the white man". In this sort of objection the thing, child attitude of whites to blacks stands out so clearly. To be sure, whites have brought new and vastly complicated technical machinery. But in ethico-religious terms, progress is to be measured in human and not gadget categories. In South Africa, human relations — pride, dignity, justice, and freedom — have been continually and savagely eroded. Whites place a greater value on their technical civilization than on human beings — especially if those human beings happen to be black.

Quite clearly the white man's assertion of the black man's humanity has very little indeed to do with being human in an economic, social, and political sense. The black is free to be religious, but he is not to be free to be a man.

Jesus in His Situational Context: An Interpreter's Guess

I have quite deliberately entitled this section a "guess" at the message of Jesus to the poor, disinherited Jews of his day, in their situation of recurring scuffles for freedom. I have done so because the Gospels were *written* with this audience not in mind. We have, therefore, to try very often to read between the lines, and this is always a risky business. But since the situation of blacks in South Africa is so desperate and corresponds so clearly to that of Jesus' first hearers, and since the interpretation of the message of Jesus through the white South African filter is frequently so degrading, the attempt to re-interpret Jesus, however risky, must be made.

What did Jesus say about the humanity of the disinherited of his day? There appear to be three major things in the Jesus-message which constitute its revolutionary character. It is these three things which made the Gospel not an opium for the people, but a ferment for new freedom.

God's love for man demands his self-affirmation

The first is that man's worth is grounded in God's love for him. It is grounded not in any natural ability, historical culture, human achievement, or the assessment of other people. No man is inherently worthy or inherently unworthy. God's love is the sole creator of worth. A man has value simply by being loved by God. Here is the religious foundation of the equality of men: no man is excluded from the love of God. To affirm God's love, therefore, is to affirm the value of all people as human beings. As trite as this may sound, its consequences are enormous. It is not simply a moralistic message that we should be prepared to affirm the worth of others, although that is implied. It is far more radical. It means that to affirm God is to affirm my own human worth. Christ commanded not simply that we should love our neighbours, but that we should love them as we love ourselves. If we were meant to deny our own worth and to denigrate ourselves, the logical implication of the great commandment would be that we should treat others also as having no value. It is only when we attach value to ourselves that it becomes meaningful to attach it to others. The white churches' lip-service to the philosophy that "I am nothing in the sight of God" is a monstrous social and religious lie — and a solid foundation on which to build the black man's nothingness.

Throughout the pages of the New Testament, Jesus tries to persuade people to affirm their humanity in a Roman society which has disinherited them. He tells them that they are worth more than birds and flowers. He tells them that he loves them. He affirms them in everything he does and says, so that they will affirm themselves. The incident of the woman caught in the act of adultery by Jewish legalists is instructive. First he deals with the men who want to stone her by saying that only the faultless men should throw stones at her. Then, not wanting to have her grovel before him in self-reviling, he tells her that she is forgiven, must stand up and affirm her womanhood. When she does so, her personal liberation begins.

God's righteousness demands the affirmation of Christ

So the Gospel begins with a big demand for self-affirmation. Here the fight for freedom begins. This is its true revolutionary potential. When a

person can affirm his value as a human being despite all the labels that society imposes upon him, saying, "No, I won't conform to your degrading and dehumanizing stereotypes", such a message must be political dynamite. But freedom is not *doing* what I want to do, but *being* what I should be. A man is free when he sees clearly the fulfilment of his being, and is thus capable of making the envisioned self a reality. To put this in theological terms, it is not enough to affirm God's love: that leads to sheer sentimentality. We have also to affirm the righteousness of God. Love saves righteousness from being legalistic, but righteousness gives content to the human value that is affirmed by God's love.

It is never enough in Christ's terms simply to affirm my being. Living is meaningless until one has found something to live for which is worth more than life itself. To be human is to find something worth dying for. As Jesus put it, "The man who tries to find life will lose it, but the man who is prepared to lose life for my sake will find what life is all about". If the assertion of God's love demands that we should affirm ourselves, God's righteousness demands that we should affirm God, Christ, and our neighbour. In this, it is affirming Christ which is central. All the rest flows from this. Thus the question becomes, what does it mean to be prepared to lose one's life for the sake of Christ? Does this mean to be an other-worldly, a-political, a-social being?

God's justice demands man's liberation from everything dehumanizing

This question brings us to the third vital element in the Jesus-message of what it means to be human, which makes Christianity so revolutionary. The question is, what was Jesus about that gives the "righteousness" content to the love of God?

It is important to remember, as we have seen, that Christ was identified with the poor, totally disinherited Jews of his day. He was one of them. Socially and politically he had no privileges. He did not sit up among the social "haves" waving gaily to the "have nots" with vague promises that their patience would some day be rewarded. Rather, he worked with, among, and for the disinherited, so that what message and program he had sprang from the bowels of the people. It was of the people, for the people, and had to be put into effect by the people. If they were to be free, they would have to take their freedom; they had no Roman Jesus who might induce a moral hand-out.

Jesus' message was clearly not just an other-worldly "religious" one: it was social to the core. Jesus himself says that God's Spirit has been given to him to preach the good news to the poor, and the content of that good news was "deliverance to captives, recovering of sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed" (Luke 4:18). This is not pious talk

suitable for aseptic little religious prayer meetings. In Christ, God has identified himself with suffering men. He has taken sides with them to bring them freedom from the things that crush them. Not only does Christ side unmistakably with the wretched of the earth for their liberation, he takes sides against evil. His whole life was a deliberate offensive against those powers which held men captive. His ministry began with a conflict with Satan, and every exorcism was a binding and spoiling of Satan. There is absolutely no need to get bogged down in the quaint problems of the personalization of Satan. It is sufficient to note that men are really controlled by real powers of evil. There are forces from beyond themselves that cripple spiritually, physically, and socially.

The usual language of the message of the cross is that here Christ finally defeated Satan. Many interpreters, noting the continuance of evil in the world, take this to mean that while the major battle has been fought and won, minor battles and mopping-up skirmishes are still going on. This is a totally unrealistic view of evil. Paul is more pertinent when he speaks passionately and eloquently of our dying *with* Christ, being buried *with* him, and rising *with* him. What this message of our contemporaneity with Christ appears to mean is that we are still involved in Christ's fight against evil. As much for us as for him this is a real fight against real evil. But the fight is worth while because evil is not omnipotent. That is the heart of the message of the resurrection.

One does not need a theological degree to grasp the significance of a message like this. He approached these wretched poor men, and first he lit the dangerous fire of their sense of dignity and worth as human beings. Next he fanned this flame, saying that living is nothing unless you have something big enough to die for. Finally, he stood alongside the poor, the traitors, the prostitutes, the political nobodies, the cripples, and said, "God's love and justice demand that you be free". And he pointed the way by tackling any and every debilitating form of social evil, from the upper-class religious snob, who was destroying the dignity of the poor, to physical disease. So when Jesus affirmed a man, he most certainly affirmed his humanity, not simply in religious terms, but morally, socially, physically, and politically. His whole message had to do with the liberation of man from everything that crippled, degraded, or dehumanized him. Paul was absolutely right when he summarized the Gospel as, "For freedom did Christ set you free", and it was a freedom which tore through the barriers of race, nationality, and sex.

* * *

What, then, in particular did Jesus have to say about the three issues of poverty, political disinheritance, and the use of force?

Free self and society from a "have" and "have not" system

On the question of poverty, it is to be noted that Christ's taking sides with the poor was coupled often with a harsh rejection of wealth. This is seen with outstanding clarity in the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus asking about salvation. Jesus told him he had first to go and sell everything he had and to give the proceeds to the poor. Jesus was not advocating simply a program of poverty relief. His concern was for the young man who was being destroyed by the chains of excessive wealth. He saw to the heart of the problem, which was that wealth destroys a man's capacity to be human. As he walked away, Jesus generalized on the incident, saying, "It is as easy for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle as it is for a rich man to inherit the Kingdom of God." The letter of St. James says much the same thing; written to poor Christians, it warns them to be very, very careful about taking rich people into their fellowship, because it is always the rich who oppress the poor. It is also significant that on the day of the first Pentecost, when Christians made their first attempt at putting into practice the Jesus-message, they obliterated wealth distinctions among themselves by sharing everything they possessed.

So the moralistic hand-out message of the white church's interpretation of Matthew 25 cannot have been what Jesus intended at all. When placed alongside what he had to say to the rich young ruler, it cannot be paraphrased as, "Please, you wealthy people, scrape a few crumbs to the poor". There is no indication that it was addressed to the rich *élite*. It was a message to the poor and for the poor, who themselves would know what it means to be hungry and thirsty, homeless and in prison, and excludes the rich whose riches will always blind and bind them. It cannot mean simply: see Christ being downtrodden in your neighbour's wretchedness and do something to break that evil. It says also: see Christ in your own wretchedness and break free. If you look after yourself and your neighbour at the same time, you will either all be poor together, or all be rich together, and so be free to be human.

It is noteworthy that Christ promises no divine assistance in this process of freeing one's self and society from the economic enslavement of the system of "haves" and "have nots". All that is promised is an eternal "well done". It is to be man's endeavour, once he has been inflamed by the sense of his own and his neighbour's value. That freeing was what Christ was all about. And Christ said that if we but discover this secret of real living, we will be prepared to lose our lives for the sake of it. He was realist enough to know that this message was highly dangerous in the situation of his day, so he said that life will be found only if we are prepared to lose it for his sake — and for the sake of "the man".

The key to the prison of political disinheritance

On the question of the politically disinherited, it is again pertinent that in Jesus God identified himself with the disinherited. Before we start from this basis to attempt an interpretation of the saying, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's", it is important to remember that Jesus was a Jew. The significance of this is that it is not unlikely that he shared the Jew's understanding of their history. That history began at the Exodus when Moses led out of Egypt a straggling bunch of ex-slaves who were fired by the conviction that this was God's plan. The Jews were God's chosen people, and he had sent Moses not only to free them from their slavery, but also to establish them in the land he would give to them. From their belief that Israel was God's land which he had set aside for his people, flowed two great convictions: (a) God alone was King in Israel; to no one else could a true Israelite give his allegiance; no one else could he serve. (b) The people of Israel alone had a God-given right to the land; though God might have punished Israel in the past by letting a foreign power rule the land temporarily, this was always a temporary, passing arrangement. Jesus would have known that Israel was God's land, when he answered questions about paying taxes to Rome.

In the light of this situation and this faith, it is not so easy to assume that Jesus was giving any legitimacy at all, not even a limited divine right, to the Roman government. "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's". What was Caesar's anyway? Did he have the right to their allegiance simply because he had invaded the land and colonized it? Hardly. His first hearers probably interpreted it, "Give Caesar nothing, for everything in Israel is God's". This interpretation certainly makes sense of the accusation brought against Jesus that he incited the people not to pay their taxes to Rome. While Jesus frequently condemned the collaborationist Sadducees and even the upper-class and more genteel nationalist Pharisees, there is no record whatever of his condemnation of the violently nationalistic Zealots. It is significant also that he ridiculed the Gentile rulers and called the Roman puppet, Herod, a "fox". Further, Jesus died on a cross, the death of a political insurgent. Jesus came to open the prison doors, not simply for thieves and cheats, but also for the people in the much larger prison of their disinheritance. He did not, himself, unlock the door for them. What he did was to provide the key of affirming the dignity of the disinherited poor and their history, and this combination must have ignited the flames of freedom.

The use and misuse of violence

Finally, what was the message of Jesus on the question of the means

to freedom? Was Jesus the king of all pacifists? Against the easy conclusion that he was totally committed to pacifism, the following facts need to be noted carefully. It is startling that although Simon the Zealot was a faithful member of the Twelve, at no stage is there an overt condemnation of the Zealot party. Since the writers were prepared, according to biblical critics, to put sayings into the mouth of Jesus, and were writing for Romans, it is strange that they did not commend their Master by presenting him as opposed to the Zealots – the arch-enemies of the Romans in Israel. This does not prove that Jesus approved of the Zealot methods. It simply points out that it cannot be easily shown that he was opposed to them.

There is the strange fact also that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus' disciples were carrying swords. Admittedly Jesus did not approve of the use to which his disciples put their swords, saying, "He who lives by the sword will die by the sword". But that could mean a lot of things. The Romans lived by the sword. Would they not have understood this to mean that this was not the time and place for it? If, on the other hand, his remarks were intended solely for his disciples, his saying and his command might be interpreted as meaning that violence is not, in fact, the way to achieve freedom.

Finally, there is evidence that Jesus was prepared to act illegally, that he did insult the political and religious leaders of his day, and that he was ready to use physical force when he was strongly convinced about some political evil. He acted illegally when he broke Jewish civil and religious laws which he believed were pointless restrictions on human compassion. He called Herod a "fox", and lumped together the Sadducees and Pharisees as a bunch of "whited sepulchres", very respectable looking gravestones hiding the useless, putrefying corpses underneath. And when he drove the money-changers from the Temple, he was reacting with startling violence against the political subjection of his people. The Zealots refused so much as to touch money bearing the insignia of Caesar, and here were Jews doing traffic in the Temple, the very heart of the faith that this land and people were God's – a tacit admission that God's claims were purely religious and had nothing to do with politics. As an explanation of his act, this is certainly more satisfying than the usual one, given without any solid supporting evidence, that a lot of filthy cheating was going on among the money-changers.

Do good, keep the initiative, and have no enemies

We need also to look again at the message of Jesus about going the second mile, turning the other cheek, and loving one's enemies, and the fact that he himself never took up arms with Zealots against Rome.

The usual interpretation of going the second mile and turning the other cheek is that Jesus enjoined his disciples to an absolute and self-denying humility in the face of what any man did to them. If, however, the message about the love of God creating human value and self-respect has any claim to validity, this "happy doormat" interpretation seems to be a distortion of the truth. The disinherited could make no appeal against a Roman soldier who felt too lazy to carry his own bags or wanted to have a little sport with the Jews. He could even satisfy the fancy he took to a Jew's coat. Jewish resistance could mean a severe beating and even death in the nearest ditch. Perhaps Jesus is counselling his disinherited followers, "Look, it is humiliating to be pushed around like this, but it is pointless to die. How then can you, when you're alone out on the road and a Roman accosts you, keep both your life and your dignity? You can both obey him and yet set the conditions of your obedience. Don't go one mile, go two. The first mile will be his, but the second yours. If he hits you once, challenge him to hit you again — don't cringe and crawl and plead for mercy. Confuse him with your defiant pride in yourself. You must maintain whatever initiative you can in your humiliating circumstances, if you are not going to accept total annihilation as a person."

This interpretation is backed by Paul, who advises Christians not to return evil for evil, because in doing good and keeping the initiative you "heap coals of fire" on the enemy's head (Romans 12:20), that is, you will probably shame him. These words of Jesus to his followers need not be interpreted as a general rule for all forms of political behaviour in all circumstances, but as very sound advice to people who, like the Jews to whom he spoke, could often find themselves in hopelessly tight corners within the situation of disinheritance.

What would have happened if Jesus had led a violent revolution against Rome? He knew only too well what Jewish exclusiveness could do to people. He knew that Jews would have to come a long, long way before they would open their doors to Gentiles and accept them as people. So a violent revolution would most likely have replaced Roman dictatorship with Jewish dictatorship, and Jewish disinheritance with non-Jewish disinheritance. His unbelievably difficult uphill battle was against the demon of political power itself, which, when it is not shared because men do not recognize both their own worth and that of every man, breeds the misery of disinheritance.

Thus, what Jesus was doing was calling for a love of God which affirms the human value of every man: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God and thy neighbour as thyself". Only in a prior and genuine acceptance of that is there any realistic hope of chaining the devil of disinheritance. Jesus did not condemn the Jewish revolutionaries who turned to

violence, nor did he join them. Why did he not tell them to stop? It is just possible that while he saw their efforts as politically futile, and as not altering the human condition, he also saw that there were flickers of recognition among humiliated people that they themselves really were human beings and not things. Perhaps even in hate, the revolutionaries were affirming their own being, and so affirming at least one consequence of their belief in God. He could not go along with them, nor could he extinguish this tiny ray of hope. For himself and those who chose to follow him, self-affirmation really became hope for the death of disinheritance only when it had room for the affirmation of the human value of others.

Therefore, suggestions like "Love your enemies" must have sounded empty and cowardly to people suffering under Rome, who wanted the political shoe on another foot. But for Jesus, real hope for men lay in all feet being politically shod. "Love your enemies" does not mean to go crawling on your bellies before those who disinherit you and treat you like things. It means that you should have no enemies at all, and that is possible only when there is a parity of power. The Christian is committed to work for that. He will undoubtedly be hounded and killed for this revolutionary vision, but he will accept nothing short of it. Love which is prepared to stop short of power must breed a race of self-dehumanizing beggars.

So this Jesus-message to the disinherited is a message of hope. It shouts that we have to destroy the devils of human indignity and thingness whether they eat like a canker from within or crush like a vice from without; we have to destroy the devil if it makes another poor, and your power will have to be destroyed if it disinherits another. Jesus puts a damper on the means of violence if it is dreamed that violence will produce the real thing, but the exercise of power, even physical force, is not extinguished if through it man expresses his own God-given right to human worth.

The Immediate and the Ultimate Concerns of the Church

In Christ God identified himself with the politically disinherited poor for the purpose of affirming their humanity, liberating them, and calling them to a vision of society which would bind the devil of political and economic disparity. From this it follows that if the church is in any sense the Body of Christ, an extension of the incarnation, then it will be where Christ was and is, sharing in this work of liberation. For Christ, the struggle against thingness did not begin by his seeking out the ear of the Roman rulers to persuade them to set his people free.

It began by his moving among his disinherited people, affirming and re-affirming their humanity, so that they would sit up and take stock of themselves and say "Yes" to this message and "No" to Rome's stereotypes. Blacks must drink in the message that they are men because God's love has decided they are such, until they are deeply, deeply angry about their exploitation and powerlessness. They must be enabled by the Gospel to affirm not only their humanity but also their blackness.

When the church has set alight the flame of human dignity and freedom, then begins the terrifying, difficult task of pointing to what love means when it is translated in terms of a system of economic and power distribution. Here the church can expect disappointing rejection. But it dare not sell its soul by sacrificing the future to the immediate. Its immediate concern is with the suffering blacks. But its ultimate concern is men without any labels. The blacks have a right to freedom now, but that right itself will become a devil if their freedom means a new enslavement for others. It must affirm that love, which expresses itself in authentic sharing, is the only sure barrier against the new poor and the new disinherited. It is easy to visualize this view being rejected. This should not surprise us, for the Jesus-message always was both good news and offence. It is easy to imagine violence as the outcome of inflaming a sense of human dignity and a passion for freedom, just as it is easy to imagine the political message of love being rejected. If it happens, the church will both rejoice and weep. It will rejoice that at least part of the Jesus-message has been heard. But it will weep because it will know full well that it will have to fight the same old evil of disinheritance in a new form.

ABOUT BLACK THEOLOGY

Gabriel Setiloane

The term "Black Theology" is used to refer to the whole area of theological thinking by Black Man in the world. It is negatively inspired by the feeling that, in the past, theologians have been insensitive to and neglectful of certain experiences of mankind in our life together on this planet. These are the experiences of the poor man and of the down-trodden. As the Black Man usually falls into these two categories they are therefore the experience of the Black Man. It seeks to redress this and thus is "addressed to blacks as an identifiable group".¹ Used outside the USA, the term comprises all the theological reflections of the Black Man from within his *zeits en leben*, not aping nor copying those of the white man, but based on his own confrontation with God in his unique and particular situation through the ages. It recognizes that all theology is born out of and reflects a social and cultural experience, and is therefore apologetical. It claims that the social and cultural setting of the Black Man and his experience, alone and within the general family of mankind, has an equal right with any other to serve as a legitimate basis for reflection about God, man, and society. It is summed up in a characteristic quip which did the rounds in the first AACC Assembly in Kampala in 1963: "The last word in theology does not have to come

¹ Preston N. Williams, "The Atlanta Document: An Interpretation", *The Christian Century*, October 15, 1969.

from Edinburgh, Marlborough, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, or Yale".² It may well come from Kampala, Yaoundé, or Atlanta.

My own point of view is that Black Theology, as I have tried to define it, did not begin in the United States. Indeed our American brothers with their TV cameras, mass media, and communication gadgets, and the newsworthiness of their electrically charged situation, have stolen our thunder, and helped to make Black Theology, along with all the causes of the Black Man, famous. I will therefore let them speak first. According to Preston Williams, Assistant Professor of Social Ethics at Boston University, and co-author of the "Atlanta Document on Black Theology":

Theology can be defined as reflection on faith of a community, as an attempt to order systematically that faith and the experience of it to the end that the community may know itself more fully. The theologian chooses an integrating concept to illuminate both the faith and the nature of reality. At various times in history nature, grace, hope, revolution have all served as integrating concepts, for while theologies are intended to be universal they reflect concrete and particular events or cultures. Thus we speak of German, British, American, or Roman theologies, or romantic, pragmatic, process, or historical theologies. In short, since the theologian necessarily carries on his work in a particular concrete culture, his method of analysis and his integrating concept are in some degree rooted in that culture. Black Theology is another of the many forms theology has taken. Potentially it has all the faults and all the virtues of any other form. If it claims to be pre-eminent, that claim must be verified, not simply asserted.³

The document that Preston Williams was defending or interpreting itself makes the declaration that:

Black Theology is a theology of liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of 'blackness'. It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says 'no' to the encroachment of white oppression.

Then follow some very choice affirmations:

The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom is the Gospel. Jesus is the Liberator! 'He hath sent me to preach deliverance to the captives' (Luke 4:18) ...The demand that Christ the Liberator imposes on all men requires all blacks to

² "Freedom and Anarchy in the Church", address to the AACC Inaugural Assembly at Kampala, 1963, by G.M. Setiloane.

³ Williams, *op. cit.*

affirm their full dignity as persons and all whites to surrender their presumptions of superiority and abuse of power.⁴

This was Atlanta, Georgia, June 1969. To many it sounded like something very new. But the same sentiment had been expressed, albeit in less polemic terms, by the delegates to the AACC Youth Assembly in Nairobi, December 1962. They declared:

In the freedom which Jesus Christ has given us, we affirm ourselves to be African Christians. To be Christian in this time and place means to be fully engaged in the whole of African life. Following Jesus Christ, our first task is to identify ourselves with all men... (this really meant all African men, educated, uneducated, traditional, etc.) ...to seek to serve them, and to love them. It is through such participation in life that we shall experience continually the cross in which is our freedom... We may make mistakes, but our confidence is in the Holy Spirit.

But this was not quite clear until a forthright rejection of outside interference was written into it:

We are convinced that anyone, or any organization, or any missionary body wishing to help us with our problems must be willing first to submit themselves to the requirements of our situation. All the efforts of our youth and student movements have to be tested by, and geared to, these our convictions and intentions.⁵

I think Preston Williams speaks for us all when he sums up what Black Theology is all about:

Black Theology asserts that God's word for every man is freedom and liberation. At this moment in history, liberation of the black man is God's mighty act, and all black men must participate in it. The task of the white man is simply to 'let my people go'. The gospel is Freedom. Jesus is the liberator. No black Christian sees the gospel as a message of enslavement or Jesus as commanding him to surrender his black humanity.

Again:

The meaning of black theology is quite clear: the black churchman must stand with his black community. If there is tension between the community and faith, he must make the tension creative...

⁴ "Black Theology: A Statement of the National Committee of Black Churchmen", issued on June 13, 1969, at the Inter-denominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia. Often referred to as "The Atlanta Document", and published in *The Christian Century*, see note 1.

⁵ *What Is It to Us*. Quotations and Questions from ACCYA, Nairobi, 1962-63, prepared by G.M. Setiloane and published by WSCF, Geneva, Switzerland, 1963.

Thus:

They do not condemn the Christian faith. What they condemn is the racist interpretations and institutions that characterize so much of Christianity. For the same reason the Nairobi Assembly was very strong on the combination *African Christian*.

Black Theology or African Theology

The difference between American Black Theology enthusiasts and the Africans is that the Americans do their theologizing in the dust and heat of political warfare, hence their militancy and impatience; whereas we can claim to work in an atmosphere of physical political freedom and comparable calm. We feel the encroachment of the west or white man more in the cultural, theoretical-philosophical, or ideological area of life than in the politico-social. Therefore, the Africans appear to come at it in a more relaxed way, as in this statement from Abidjan:

By African theology we mean a theology which is based on the Biblical faith and speaks to the African 'soul' (or is relevant to Africa). It is expressed in categories of thought which arise out of the philosophy (world wide) of the African people... To speak of African theology involves formulating clearly a Christian attitude to other religions. It must be pointed out that the emphasis is basically on *Christian* theology, which could be expressed through African thinking and culture. In changing Africa many people are engaged in trying to rediscover or capture the 'soul' of Africa. The Church has a duty to study the best method of helping to create the 'new' man and community of Africa. Hence the problem of working out an African theological expression is urgent.⁶

Obviously African Theology, like Black Theology of the United States, is born in the arena of human and cultural encounter, out of the frustration of trying to make Christian truths comprehensible — truths which are themselves clothed in foreign concepts and a totally different world view. The expression I have used previously is "Christ dressed in foreign swaddling clothes". The attempt of both African and American Theologies is to rip off the foreign swaddling clothes and thus to expose the authentic naked *kerygma*. As Preston Williams puts it, "The task of Black Theology is to mine Christianity in order to bring to light its real truth and strength". Therefore I do not agree that Black Theology is for the Black Man only, as Preston Williams and some of his colleagues often want to indicate. It sheds light on God's truth — universal truth, which

⁶ *Engagement*, The Second AACC Assembly, Abidjan, 1969, AACC, P.O. Box 20301, Nairobi, Kenya, pp. 114ff.

is applicable to *all* men, white, brown, and, of course, black. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it has been refined in the fire of experience of the Black Man ... and I mean fire!

Speaking for Africa: what we cannot buy in western theology is its inevitable dependence on western culture, civilization, or whatever you call it. Its Greek-Roman thought-forms and modes of expression are the "swaddling clothes" that we need to tear open in order to get to Christ. The white man could not have done otherwise: every man understands truth and expresses it according to his own situation. This westernizing trend begins already in the Bible days: stoicism, agnosticism, and other current philosophical modes of thought found their way into the biblical writings. The accretions increased as western civilization advanced, so that by the time Christianity came to Africa it was a tightly-packed and sealed package. If theology is reflection, in African theology we try to break the seal of western thought-forms and culture so that we can come face to face with Christ, and in him see ourselves, and others. "Selfhood" is the word used in Africa as the goal of this search. I was struck by the fact that Preston Williams uses "self-determination", a term we used when we were struggling for political freedom. "Thus in standing firm for our freedom (which Christ has given us, the Nairobi Assembly would add) we shall be participants in the task of reconciling the world unto God."⁷

Objections and Criticisms

(a) Black Theology has been criticized as being too militant and polemical. First, I would answer that most creative theological thinking over the ages has been done in an atmosphere of controversy and polemics, e.g., the Early Church, the Reformation, etc. Secondly, if theology is apologetics, then it is by nature polemical. Black Theology has to become especially so because of the mass of theological thought across which it has to make its points, and the sheer cultural prejudice against the Black Man and his thinking capacities through the ages.

(b) The other criticism is: why set out consciously to theologize, i.e., build a theology? Answer: because the pressure of frustration is so great on us. We are smothered to death by western theologies which to us are human fabrications, changing fashions daily, and sometimes, we think, vying with each other in seeking so much to cut God down to size that some have now actually got rid of him. We have to be serious; we cannot stand still. So if we find we cannot use the tools of western

⁷ Williams, *op. cit.*

theology, we have consciously to seek others. Perhaps in this way not only we ourselves but the whole world of faith could be saved.

(c) My own criticism of the American version of Black Theology is that it builds too much on the "sufferings of the past" through which the Black Man has gone: the Americans "want to utilize the religious resources which, refined and purified by the sufferings of generations of blacks, exist in the black community today". True. There is a legitimate axe to grind. But the sufferings of the blacks are not the whole of their experience. Even in the United States, as the whole world recognizes in music, drama, etc., the other side of Black America's experience of God is patent: the *xaira*, joy, and celebration of faith that come through in their songs, from "Satchmo" to "We shall overcome", the humour and generally detached attitude toward the transitory nature of life which can come only through knowing, out of practical living, that the real citizenship which is denied us here — a situation which we violently contest — "is in heaven", whatever we understand by that.

THEOLOGICAL GROUNDS FOR AN ETHIC OF HOPE

Manas Buthelezi

Hope is one of the basic spiritual ingredients that serve to enhance the quality of human life, wherever it is found. Life without a dimension of hope is but a caricature of the divine gift of creation which the Bible dramatically reports: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). Where man leads a life without hope, there is lacking a clear appreciation of the value and purpose of life itself. In short, a dimension of quality is missing.

A suicide is one who has so completely lost the sense of value and purpose in his continued existence that he does not hesitate to see as his immediate duty the termination of his own life. A habitual criminal or saboteur of social order is one who has, among other things, subconsciously so lost a sense of the value and ultimate purpose of what society at large regards as cultural and moral goods worth preserving that he sees no wrong and personal loss in undermining it. Much good and order in God's world has been wrecked by men without hope. Indeed sin itself is a pool in which hopeless men may swim. To speak of a society of hopeless men is a contradiction in terms. Hopelessness and social order are mutually exclusive. Hopelessness as the loss of a wholesome vision of what is and is to be is a sure gateway to anxiety and panic.

The Christian Gospel is designed to fill man with hope in order that he may realize that life is worth living and that he has a role to play in

improving the quality of life of his fellowmen, through filling them with the same hope which has sustained him. In what follows we shall address ourselves to the socio-ethical content of hope by way of characterizing its theological basis. We hope thereby to highlight the theological ingredients of a socio-ethical outlook which breeds the hope so necessary for a dynamic social order. For the purpose of our discussion we have isolated two interrelated theological concepts, namely, *Faith in God*, and *Faith in God's World*. Our presentation will be in the form of an outline of a theological approach. Details of practical application and implementation will not be our immediate concern. In the first section we shall show how faith in God through Christ has an ethical dimension of hope that has a bearing on daily life. We shall use the concept of the body of Christ to demonstrate that a dynamic Christian discipleship derives from a feeling of security and a sense of belonging to a corporate solidarity anchored in Christ. In the final section our aim will be to show how faith understood as acceptance of God's grace has a socio-ethical perspective which we have dubbed "faith in God's world".

Faith in God

Hope is inseparable from the other two members in the Pauline trinity of virtues, namely, faith, hope, and love (I Cor. 13:13). It is one facet of the tripartite "Christian heart". The dynamics of the Christian life are such that it is almost impossible to determine with any degree of precision where hope ends and where faith and love begin. Yet in this section we shall, as it were, abstract hope and discuss it against its divine basis and object. Its inner relationships with faith and love will, however, remain apparent throughout.

The reality of sin that engulfs man in his sociality accounts for his conscious or subconscious experience of anxiety and estrangement. He is torn within himself and from his creational context of God and his fellowmen. This relational state of alienation creates in him the feeling of insecurity. He is insecure because his life is dislocated from its anchor or ground of being — to use a Tillichian phrase. The human experience of the threat and dread of death is the epitome of his existential feeling of insecurity and dislocation. We shall elaborate on this in the next section. After describing the conflicting spiritual forces that vie in man, Paul ends by exclaiming, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:24-25)

Later Augustine also underlined this truth when he remarked in his classic statement that man's heart is restless until it finds rest in God

who is the Creator of man. Man's restlessness takes many directions including the creation of human anchors of security. If man delays in finding the true God on whom to pin his hope, he does not hesitate to create gods after his own image. "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, 'Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him'" (Ex. 32:1). The *ethnos* of Jahweh made the golden calf which would serve as a substitute basis for an *ethos* which would replace the *ethos* of the Ten Commandments anchored in Jahweh. It is important for us to remember that the giving of the Ten Commandments was tied to a future promise: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, *you shall be my own possession* among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and *you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Ex. 19:5-6).

The original non-theological Hebrew meaning of covenant was an arrangement between two unequal partners in which the more powerful bound himself to a certain attitude towards the less powerful provided certain conditions were fulfilled by the latter. Even in theological usage, this element of the concept is retained, as the above reference in Exodus shows. Jahweh is the initiator and sole benefactor in the covenant relationship. Israel's role is only to enjoy the benefits of the steadfastness of Jahweh's promise, provided she remains faithful to Jahweh in hopeful anticipation of the fulfilment of that promise. The medium of "promise" and "fulfilment" is faithful participation in a community life whose *ethos* emanates from Jahweh's sovereign will. It is an *ethos* of hope, since it is animated by Jahweh's promise whose fulfilment is already realized in hope.

Even though the New Testament uses different theological frames of reference, the basic pattern of relationship between God and man is retained. The radically new factor is Jesus Christ who *is* the *ethos* of the new community. According to John, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). It is because Christ is the *ethos* of the new community that Paul can speak of the church as the body of Christ (Col. 1:18). Behind this figure is the Hebraic notion of "corporate personality" in which a member of a family unit or tribe stands and acts for the entire social unit of which he is a member. The individual and his family, for instance, form an organism which is so closely knit that no single part of it can be separated and regarded as independent.

It is significant that, when Paul introduces the section on Christian ethical responsibility in Romans, he uses the analogy of the body in which each member plays a unique and necessary role for the benefit of all (Rom. 12). The ethical role of the members of the body of Christ

should be seen against what Paul has said earlier in the sixth chapter concerning "dying and rising with Christ" in baptism. The ethical implication of this is that Christian life is life after Christ. That which happened to Christ, the new head of the human ethnic corpus, should happen to all who are members of it, since this has indeed already taken place in a sacramental fashion. Life after Christ follows the path that leads to victory after winding through the tunnel of suffering. Against the background of his own experience, Paul sums up this paradox in the Christian ethic thus: "We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything." (II Cor. 6:8-10)

The Christian ethic is essentially an ethic of hope: its context of realization is the "now" and "not yet"; the oppressive struggle coexists with the consciousness of victory as a realized eschatological event. That is why the delay in the manifestation of fruits does not detract from the intensity of a genuinely Christian ethical endeavour. The boundary between faith and hope melts away when — while faith affirms the reality of the present — hope affirms the future reality as already present. We know that God in Christ, who has called us to follow him under all circumstances, is also Lord over all situations and breeds a sustaining hope. Seen from the side of the sovereignty of God and occasional Christian experience, life is a solidarity that defies any artificial dichotomization. We may forget that we have a responsibility to inspire hope not only among those who are struggling in the church, but also among those who are toiling in life situations which are not ordinarily regarded as Christian.

Time and time again the Christian tries — very often with apparent success — to run away from the harsh realities of daily life, in order to retreat into his spiritual ecclesiastical ghetto. If he is honest with himself, he sooner or later discovers the stark reality of the ineluctability of common daily life. The discovery of solidarity in the alienation from the wholeness of life, for instance, may lead us to see that in life there are strands that stretch across the believer-non-believer boundaries. The Christian discovers that, as man, he drinks the same water the non-Christians drink, and tills the soil in which they too grow their crops. He finds himself toiling alongside his "unbelieving" kinsmen, fighting the natural forces of bad weather and barren soil, and of disease and hunger. He shares with them, as a matter of fact, almost all the stigmata of alienation. He may have realized that life is a ball of fire which keeps on rolling towards him. He tries to run away from it, but, contrary to all his expectations, he discovers that he cannot escape it because he is in it. In the arena of daily life, he needs a hope that sustains him alongside his unbelieving brother, a "courage to be".

In a sense we do not precede life, but find life already waiting for us. This is true of both its biological and societal manifestations. Life precedes us because God, who is the ground of life and before whom we live and exist, is there before us, waiting with his gifts in the given life structures. The theological consciousness of the givenness of the social, economic, and political structures of life is not one of a fatalistic resignation, but of an awareness of an inevitable responsibility in those structures. This is so because to have life does not mean just to be alive, but also to contribute critically and creatively in the direction of empirical life with a view to promoting the well-being of the neighbour. It is this critical and creative shaping of the efficiency of the social structures which can instil hope among those who need it most be they Christian or non-Christian.

Faith in God's World

Just as the fact of sin explains man's alienation from God, so does it also account for the brokenness of mankind, that is the alienation of man from man. It follows that salvation does not only consist in reconciling man with God but also includes the reconciling of man with man. It is partly as a result of the influence of the theology of Pietism that this dimension of anthropology has been lost in our concept of the scope of soteriology. It is needless to point out that this has resulted in an unfortunate narrowing of the breadth of the hope of salvation so well enunciated in the Bible. I am thinking of the hope for the Messianic peace and cosmic reconciliation in passages like Isaiah 11:6ff, as well as New Testament references to love and peace among men as concomitant with the salvation event in Jesus Christ (Luke 2:14, John 13:34).

It takes faith in what God has done in Christ to reconcile man with God. Similarly it takes faith in what man has become in Christ to reconcile man with man. In forgiveness God accepts the sinner into his divine fellowship for the sake of Christ. In faith the sinner accepts God's forgiveness or acceptance as a reality that pertains to his personal existence. Man's acceptance of God's acceptance also inherently includes accepting all things which God accepts. What does God accept? He accepts the things he has created as worthy of mediating his grace to man. This is true whether we think of sacramental grace or the means he uses to preserve and sustain life in general. For instance, through the mechanical acts of eating and the ensuing physiological processes of digestion and assimilation, the presence and the continuity of empirical life is mediated. As we have said earlier, in forgiveness God accepts

fallen man into a living fellowship with him. He so accepts man that he even uses him to carry out his will in creation. The most obvious and mundane use of man by God is procreation wherein God as it were accepts man as co-creator.

Therefore in accepting what God has accepted, man accepts, among other things, other men into his fellowship. It is against this background that we speak of faith in the world as a basis for an ethic of hope. The elements of this basis are as follows. First, man accepts created reality as the sphere over which God has placed him to have dominion. He exercises this dominion in the creative works of art and technology (Gen. 1:28ff). Secondly, man accepts his neighbour as the one towards whose welfare all his efforts in this life are directed. Man in faith is man for others. His new freedom in Christ does not manifest itself in glory and power over others, but in self-giving and love for others.

That faith is at stake here can be seen in that it is impossible to love someone whom you cannot trust. When we trust God in faith, we experience freedom and serenity in our being, akin to the experience we feel in the consciousness of our self-identification with the object of our love in self-surrender and service. To serve the neighbour means to identify yourself with him by taking his place in doing that which he cannot do for himself. In serving the neighbour, you become him vicariously in the sense in which Christ became ourselves on the Cross. That is why it is impossible to love someone whom you despise and distrust. The faith-informed love becomes the acknowledgement that the object of your love is, by virtue of its being, worthy of the identification of your being with it.

This does not, however, rule out the possibility that acts of love are performed to a person in whom you do not have faith, when it comes to the question of recognizing the worth of his being *vis-à-vis* your own being. It is relatively easy to go through this ethical ritual, especially if you can sublimate your love and deflect it to God who is then imagined to be the beneficiary of that service of love. Man before whom the deeds of love are performed is seen as a "proxy" for God in his capacity as recipient of the benefits of your service.

There is a danger, however, in speaking glibly about "doing service to God". In certain instances man is used as a means to an end in deeds "of love" rendered as "service to God". An act cannot be validly moral if it is performed towards a person in whom you do not have faith as man. Morality finds meaning in the recognition of the world and the realization of the well-being of the neighbour, rather than in a fastidious God who takes pleasure in seeing man obey the laws he has capriciously made. As a matter of fact, morality does not exist outside the context of life: it is the presupposition and mainstay of societal life wherever it is found.

The morality of an act is determined by the extent to which its performance promotes the well-being of the neighbour. Such promotion is consistent with the will of God, because he is in the first place *for* the well-being of man — he has made an offer of forgiveness or acceptance of man in Christ. There is no generic difference between preaching the saving Gospel of Christ to man, and serving him in response to those other necessities of life which promote his well-being within the given life structures and contribute towards his realization of the wholeness of life.

Poverty as alienation from the wholeness of life

Let me single out an example to illustrate what I mean by the realization of the wholeness of life and the promotion of the well-being of man. From time to time historical Christianity has not failed to discern ingeniously some spiritual blessing in such social ills as poverty and disease among believers. This not altogether unquestionable insight has ranged from the radical Monastic glorification of poverty as an ethical ideal, to the mild Protestant consideration of poverty as a blessed state in which God conveniently brings his spiritual gifts to the victim and also stimulates the hearts of his saints so that they may bring material gifts of charity. Institutionalized charity is based on the tacit recognition of the poor as *bona fide* members of an established social class. The social function of charity comes to consist in making the social horror of poverty look less horrible, by turning poverty into a tenable medium of existence alongside the condition of other social strata. Indeed, knowing no better life, the poor may live happily in their poverty, especially if they get occasional doses of charity.

Far from showing the poor that poverty is a form of alienation from the wholeness of life, the church has, in her pastoral counselling, encouraged them to regard the possession of the material goods of life at best as a matter of indifference and at worst as a hindrance to Christian growth. Indirectly the poor were encouraged to be satisfied with their social state of poverty. The assumption, of course, was that Christian charity would make up what they lacked of the material necessities of life. One of Paul Gerhard's popular hymns sung in my church has words which run thus in paraphrase: "Be silent and do not grumble, you, poor one, when you see others around you who have more material possessions than you. You should know that you are richer and better off than they, since you believe in God. After all, the things of this world are passing; we are pilgrims here and our real and ultimate home is in heaven."

Of course, one can argue that spiritual goods are qualitatively more important in the nourishment of the Christian life than material ones. Granted that, as well as the fact that "man cannot live by bread alone", does it follow that man can live a balanced life with the Word of God alone, just as long as he gets the barest minimum of the necessities of life? We have to remember that the material goods of life are as much a gift of God as the Word: they are part and parcel of our creaturely existence in this world. It is not only the rich who need them. Together with the Word, they constitute means for the realization of the wholeness of life. Therefore, the Word of God cannot be legitimately pitted against them, even in the interest of giving spiritual counsel to the poor. The question whether the Word of God is more important for man has only relative validity, since the two relate to different necessities of life.

The Gospel of hope for the condemned sinner cannot be fully grasped apart from the ethic of hope for a socially displaced victim. Our illustration of poverty is a case in point. Wherein lies the hope of a poor man, assuming that he also believes in Christ like others? Charity? Shall the poor continue in poverty so that charity may abound? God forbid. How can such a highly priced love feed on human victims? In order to shed light on the perspective of hope which these questions suggest, let us give a brief theological analysis of poverty.

Passport to a rendezvous with God

Man's creaturely relationship to God is a given factor of his existence. For man, to come into being and to exist are the same thing as to be a creature of God. Thus creatureliness, which is the result of the positing of man in the world of existing things, is also a condition of man's dependence on God. To live means to be at a point of God's creation where one receives and shares with others the life-sustaining gifts of creation, which are a complementary part of human existence. To be cut off from these gifts is an aspect of alienation from the wholeness of life. As a social phenomenon, this is known as a state of poverty — a situation of hopelessness. It is in, with, and under the given social structures of human existence that we receive God's gifts of life. We cannot bypass what is around us and what has already been given in life in order to be at a point where God can bestow his gifts on us. Life in its social, economic, and political setting is our only place of rendezvous with God. It is at this point that God gives us food, children, health, protection, the means of grace, etc. As a result of this, the world around us becomes alive with God as he comes to distribute gifts to his children. The

passport to this place of rendezvous is opportunity for education, employment, and a character of diligence.

Hope for a poor man does not consist just in the removal of the symptoms of displacement, which is all charity does, but in his receiving the passport to the place of rendezvous with God. Throughout the history of the Christian church, the act of the Good Samaritan in the parable of Luke has been recognized as *the* exemplar for a Christian act of love towards the neighbour whom the parable sets out to define. This is not without reason: the parable dramatizes the nature of a self-sacrificing act which transcends ethnic differences and taboos. One characteristic feature of the act of the Good Samaritan is the selfless response to a *situation of crisis*. The quality of the ethical act here consists in transforming the victim of the situation into a neighbour.

One may ask here a few probing questions. In order to be an *ethical situation*, does a *situation of crisis* have to be one which has swollen to a point where it has engulfed human victims? Does the act of love necessarily consist only in rescuing the casualties of a *situation of crisis*? Is it not also an act of love to forestall a *situation of crisis* for the sake of a neighbour who is its potential victim?

Our ultimate ethical responsibility is not only to serve men by removing the symptoms of alienation from the wholeness of life, but to equip them with the tools which will enable them to stand on their own feet. In this manner we shall be instilling them with courage to be themselves so that they may take their place at a point in life where God continuously gives gifts to his children. They will begin to have faith in themselves as men after we have had faith in them as our fellowmen, that is, after we have "accepted" them as fellow-participants in the wholeness of life. Then shall all have something to live for — a hope that life is worth living. This is no utopian dream, since it is part and parcel of the ethic of Jesus who ministered to the whole man and said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (Matt. 9:2).

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